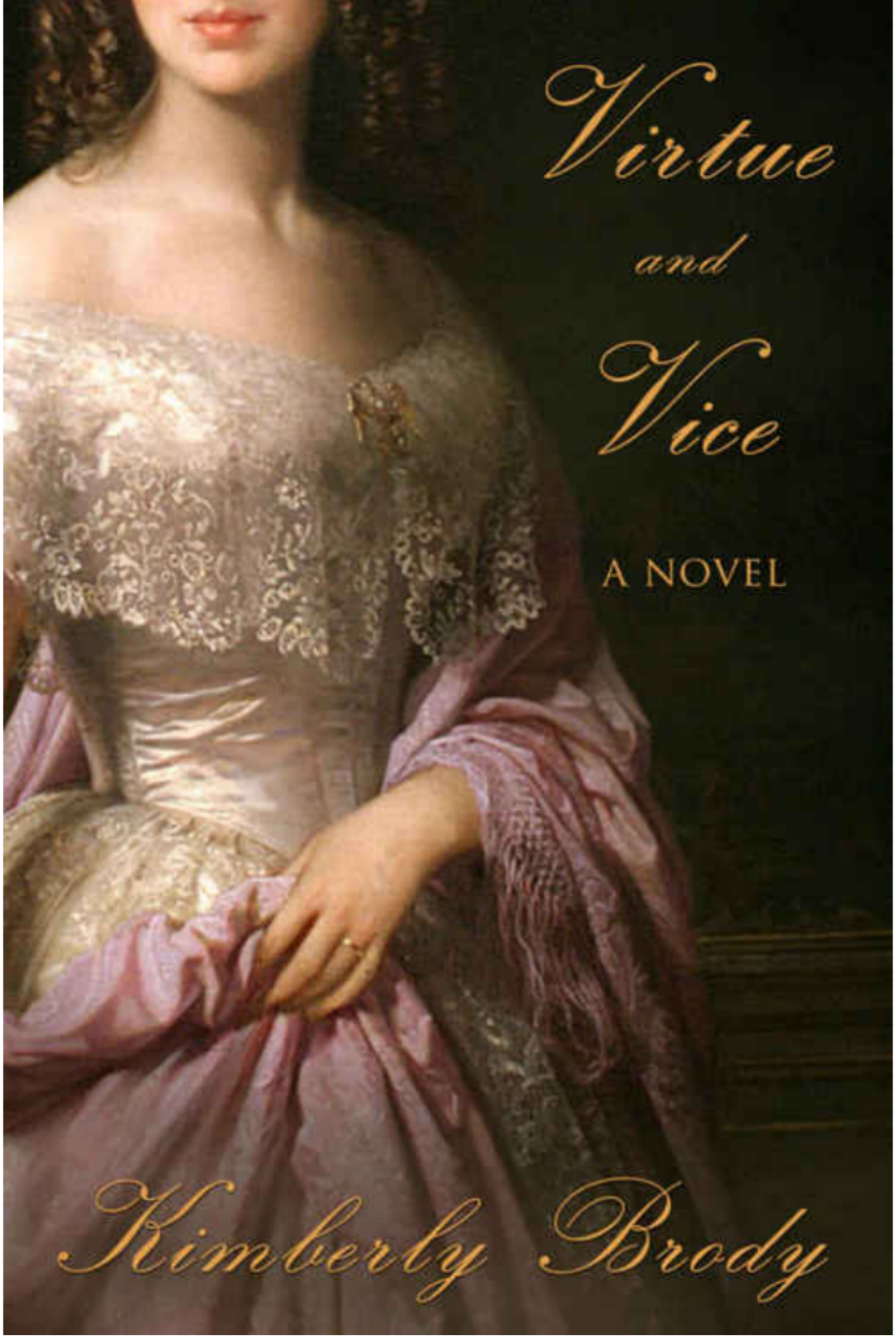

Virtue
and
Vice
A NOVEL
Kimberly Brody

# Virtue and Vice

Kimberly Brody

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**This is a work of fiction. Similarities to people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.**

# VIRTUE AND VICE

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**Written by Kimberly Brody**

Cover created by Jenny Quinlan

# Dedication

To **Ian,** my modern day hero, who slays spiders and keeps me supplied in danishes, always with unflagging love and support. To **Cara,** for an enduring friendship that has no equal and will remain unparalleled forever. To **Kate**, for tireless hours of brainstorming and countless critiques through the years.

And for **Whiskey**, the love of my life. You always were and always will be my greatest muse. I miss you every single day.

# Chapter 1

*Cornwall, England 1661*

*Whoosh!*

As the sound whistled through the air, Isabelle Beaumont grimaced and braced for the imminent blow. When switch met skin through only a thin layer of silk, it stung more than she could ever imagine. Fire leapt at the point of contact, coursing along shocked nerves. Her breath escaped with a hiss through gritted teeth.

*Whoosh!*

The second blow landed with less mercy than the first against the tender flesh of her barely clad posterior. Her fingers clenched white-knuckled around the wooden leg of the footstool over which she knelt. Tears rose in her eyes. She clamped them shut to keep the betraying moisture from leaking out.

*Whoosh!*

A sob resonated through the room and she feared it might have slipped from her own lips. But the sound came from her mother, who stood at her father's side mere feet away, watching as the ordered punishment was meted out.

"Isabelle! For God's sake, please be a good daughter and submit!" Her mother's harsh cry hurt even more than the switch, but

Izzy would not acquiesce. Not on this matter. How could she?

*Whoosh!*

The fourth blow didn't sting nearly as much as the previous three. Perhaps because her flesh had begun to go numb. She fixed her gaze beyond her parents, on the large desk at the opposite end of the dark paneled study, trying to refocus her attention on anything other than the pain.

"Enough!" Her father commanded.

Relief shuddered through Izzy. She glanced at her father's haggard face. *I outlasted him!*

With a curt nod he dismissed the Vicar's hefty wife, who'd been summoned to administer the discipline he had not been able to bring himself to deliver. Izzy almost wished it had been Papa who'd served the punishment. Despite his burly size, he probably would have gone easier on her than had Prudence Smith, who seemed content to carry on wielding the switch, and even now muttered something under her breath about 'sparing the rod'.

Izzy's mother ran to her side, stroked her face with trembling fingers and hurried to lower the rumpled damask gown back over Izzy's chemise.

Dizzy with pain, relief, and the released tension of fear, Izzy stumbled to her feet, allowing herself to lean on her mother and be led to a dark blue velvet covered sofa. As she sat her abused flesh screamed in protest, but she bit her lip and did so anyway. She couldn't let Papa see her falter now.

Gerald Beaumont waited until Mrs. Smith had been escorted

from his study before he spoke. “Why must you be so stubborn, Isabelle?”

She snuck a look at her father’s face, noting his expression drawn with both anger and regret. He hated disciplining her as much as she hated being disciplined. Well, mayhap not quite as much as she hated it. But she’d called his bluff when he’d threatened the switch, and he in turn had been forced to send for Mrs. Smith, whose eager appearance at his summons was no doubt spurred by memories of a cooling apple pie long ago stolen from her windowsill. Who would have ever guessed that a dare issued to Izzy by her brothers would have such dire consequences so many years later?

“Nothing has changed, Papa. I will *not* marry him.” Izzy raised her chin and met her father’s stern gaze as she picked up their conversation from where they’d stopped when Papa thought that perhaps the switch might gain her cooperation. It wouldn’t. It *couldn’t*.

“You will do your duty and do as I say.” He shook his head in consternation. “My God, I allowed you too much freedom in your youth. Now you think you can defy me on this.”

She may have gotten her blue eyes, chestnut curls, and diminutive height from her petite mother, but Izzy’s iron will came straight from her father, a fact Papa had oft lamented, usually with affection in his voice. He tended to turn a blind eye to her mischief or violation of his dictates, but on this matter it was proving impossible to move him.

“I will not marry a man I do not love and cannot respect. I’m in love with Paul. If I can’t marry him I shan’t wed at all!”

“Love has little bearing on marriage, and you well know it.” Her father’s expression softened. “You’re too young to know real love, Izzy. Paul will not return for you. He’s not the man you think he is.”

“He said he would come for me, Papa. If you would only wait, you’ll see he *will* come to marry me. He told me so!” Shifting with frustration at her father’s failure to understand her perspective, she winced as the cushion rubbed against her sore backside.

“I’ve given Huntley three years to come for you, despite the fact that a match with him would gain this family nothing. But now an opportunity has arisen that will restore some of our fortunes and I *will* take it. You’ve an obligation to this family. Paul is not a reasonable choice. His family is in worse financial straits than ours!” He ground one fist into his other hand, a sure sign of his growing frustration.

Her own irritation flared. “Why can’t one of my brothers make a good match to bring in the funds you so desperately need? Why must I be the one to go to the auction block? Why must I be the sacrificial lamb?”

Anger flashed in her father’s brown eyes. “Your brothers spilt their blood on the battlefield fighting with Charles. They’ve made their sacrifices. Now you will make yours!”

“And so I must spill my blood as well?”

“Your blood?” Papa looked perplexed.

“My virgin blood! Isn’t that what the Earl is paying for?”

Papa rolled his eyes. “Don’t be melodramatic, Izzy, it isn’t becoming.”

It took every bit of will power she possessed not to stamp her

foot in frustration. "*Nothing* about this travesty is becoming. Why can't you see that? You would marry me to a Parliamentarian, to a man who supported Cromwell, to a *roundhead*!" She spat the words and turned away, unable to stop the rise of tears. All her life she'd been reared to believe Charles Stuart was the rightful heir to the throne of England. Her family had gone into exile for their fallen monarch, had given their money, their lands, their very blood to see him restored to his proper place as King of England. To consider marrying one whom, until recently, had been considered an enemy was anathema.

"If the King can grant pardon to those who fought for Cromwell against his father, then you can find it in your heart to accept the past and move on." He heaved an exasperated sigh, then paced before his heavy maple desk. "This man is a viscount, the only son of the Earl, and destined to one day be a powerful earl himself. Think of it! I'm offering to make you a viscountess! But even more importantly, Chesworth holds property that once belonged to this family!"

"Then Charles will restore it to you, as he did Rendstell Manor." She glanced about at the beloved timber framed Tudor house, remembering the immense relief of the day the King had summoned them home for the first time in nine long years.

"Nay, Izzy. The King restored only those properties illegally seized by Cromwell during the war. I outright sold our land to Chesworth for the funds we so desperately needed, assuming he would want to hold the land adjacent to his own. He's under no obligation to return it, yet has agreed to do just that and pay additional funds *if* you but marry his son. They sided with Cromwell and are desperate to

marry into a family in such high standing with the king."

"What you propose I do is no better than what Buckingham did!" George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, had once been King Charles' closest friend. After years of poverty-stricken exile on the continent with his monarch, he'd snuck back into England and married the daughter of the man who'd received Villier's confiscated estates, thus recovering what he'd lost for the King's cause. What he'd done was despicable.

"Charles does not begrudge him for what he did. It was the expedient thing for Buckingham to do. It is expedient for you to marry and regain our land. If our monarch can be reasonable, so then, can you. And here I am, offering you a man who will one day make you a countess."

"I care not for his pedigree." She lifted her chin, hoping he wouldn't see it tremble. "I won't marry him, Papa."

"Please Izzy, do not make me say the words I shall speak next. It is the last thing in the world I wish to say to you!"

"Nothing you say will make me change my mind. I'll not have the roundhead, Papa!"

Her father's face hardened and instant tension filled the room. "I have been lenient with you these years past, but on this I will *not* tolerate disobedience. If you do not marry him, Isabelle, you'll no longer be my daughter."

Pain flashed across her father's face as he uttered the terrible words, but it didn't soothe the stab of betrayal that lanced her heart. Beside her, her mother gasped and grabbed Izzy's hand, squeezing it.

“Please, Isabelle?” she whispered.

With those words, Papa had effectively trapped her, after all. If she stood by her principles, she might lose her family. Her stomach clenched at the very idea. But could she give up everything she believed in, abandon the man she loved, and marry this traitor for the sake of family harmony?

What choice did she have? Icy panic clenched its fingers around her heart.

She glanced at the thin fingers entwined so tightly with her own. Her mother would be distraught if Papa disowned her, and so would Izzy. And what about Papa? He’d spent his life taking care of them all. She studied his haggard expression again. He’d aged so much in the last decade; his once dark head of hair was now liberally shot through with gray. The threat of disowning her devastated him. Could she bring more grief to him after everything else?

Her vision blurred as tears gathered anew. She loved her family with all her heart. Where would she go if Papa disowned her? How long before Paul returned to honor his promise? One of her brothers would take her in, she was sure of it. But her brothers had fought hard for the Stuart cause, and they deserved the privileges that might be bought with the monies a union with Chesworth would provide. This marriage would preserve their legacies. Could she be so selfish and deny her family so much?

But where did that leave her? Forced to give up the only man she’d ever loved, faced with the prospect of a bleak future trapped in a loveless marriage, that’s where!

Anger warred with her sense of duty. It was a cruel thing to bear, when she'd always thought the choice of husband would be hers alone. Yet in the end, there was no other decision to be made. She would sacrifice her happiness for the sake of her family.

Her submission did not mean she would do so quietly, nor would she cease to try to find a way out of her predicament.

Gathering what shreds of dignity remained after the day's punishment, she faced her father. "I will marry the *roundhead*," she spat the word as though it were venom lodged in her throat. "But I shall never forgive you for this, Papa. *Never.*"

***

Piss poor couldn't even begin to describe Ramsay Maitland's mood. Dusty and dirty from the road, he glared with impatience into the dim stable. The stamping and snorting of the horses housed within was all quite normal. The absence of a groom was not.

With a muttered curse he saw to his horse himself, his disposition no sunnier for the exertion after the long and tiring journey from London. After finishing the task he marched toward the magnificent red-bricked Tudor manor house in which he'd grown up, determined to discover why there was no one to look after his horse. The absence of staff was unusual, as the Earl had always been a stickler for propriety and quick to lecture on the importance of duty. A subject which, Ram observed with a grim frown, he'd been instructed at great length of late.

*Damn Father's meddling in my private affairs!*

Why he'd ever allowed his father to talk Ram into agreeing to a

betrothal that caused every one of his nerve endings to stand on end, he'd never understand. It didn't matter he was Viscount Royston, a grown man past thirty years, or that he had long ago surpassed his father in height. The Earl of Chesworth still had a *presence* that commanded obedience, and an irritating ability to make Ram feel like a boy of six years old. He was a bloody fool for agreeing to his father's madcap scheme.

His throat tightened and his stomach churned, as happened each time in the month since the betrothal contract was signed and he allowed his thoughts to wander towards his impending nuptials. While he'd been in London, his mistress had tried her damnedest to distract him with her bountiful charms in her boudoir, with little success.

Frustration had led him back to Cornwall, if only to sneak a peek at his bride-to-be. If he was to have any peace of mind for the next month, he needed to put his deepest fears to rest. His father claimed his betrothed was rumored to be a great beauty, but what beautiful woman remained unmarried at the advanced age of two and twenty? Of course, it was not just her looks that alarmed him. Many a man married a plain woman to advance his position. But this particular woman had spent a good portion of her life in exile, with the current monarch's courtiers, and their immorality was well known. It was his betrothed's character that truly worried him. His need to see her grew with every passing day as the wedding fast approached.

The wet crunch of the mud-laden gravel beneath his leather boots ended as he strode up the stone steps that led to the massive

wooden entrance. His father's butler opened the door and peered at him as if he were a stranger. At least Hawthorne's predictability brought a small smile to Ram's face.

"Where the bloody hell is everybody, Hawthorne?" He stepped past the butler and into the dim foyer beyond. "There are no grooms in the stable. My father would have their heads if he knew." He noticed the empty place against the wall at the base of the staircase. "And where are the footmen?"

"Apparently you've spent far too much time enjoying the frivolities of London, my lord." Hawthorne sniffed with disdain. "Today is the first of May. Do they not celebrate such a rustic holiday in our great capital city?"

Ram grinned. It had forever miffed the staid Hawthorne that the Earl kept another butler in his London household, forcing Hawthorne to remain in perpetuity in the country. "Surely you wouldn't want to be in the congested and polluted city when you have the grandeur of the Cornish countryside at your disposal?"

The butler made a sound that suspiciously resembled a snort, his stiff frame straightening beneath his Chesworth livery. "I'll find a boy and send him out to see to your horse, my lord."

"No need to pull anyone away from the festivity, I've already seen to it."

How could he have forgotten? May Day celebrations were a staple from his youth, yet many had been the years since he'd even contemplated the holiday. Cromwell had forbidden such practices, nationwide, more than a decade ago due to the heathen roots of the

festival. It was an ancient fertility celebration, said to hearken back to the days of the Romans, a reminder of the time when Pagans had inhabited the land. *Always a bloody fun day.*

"Is my father in his study?"

The silver-haired butler shook his head and gave a discreet cough. "Nay, my lord. He's in Bodmin."

Bodmin. Of course. With his mistress. It was almost as if his father knew he'd return from London today, armed with new arguments against this betrothal, and so he'd gone to ground to avoid a confrontation. Ram's mood deteriorated further.

"May I get you some refreshments, my lord?"

"Thank you, but nay." He peered closer at the butler. "No desire to dance around the maypole today, Hawthorne?"

The man came close to a laugh before he caught himself. "My missus would have my head, sir."

Ram chuckled. As a lad, he'd always enjoyed the sheer revelry of the holiday; girls and boys dancing around the may pole in merry abandonment as the May Queen looked on from her lofty throne. And then, later, when the moon was high and the children abed, men and women would mate with wild abandon; behind a bush, in the stables, against a wall. It had never been hard to find female companionship amongst the villagers during the celebrations. In fact, he and his friends had wagered each year over who would be the seducer of the May Queen into his bed.

"You make a fine point, my friend. Wives can be quite shrewish about such things, can't they? Perhaps I should take my last

opportunity as a bachelor to engage in a bit of debauchery."

Hawthorne grinned. "If your father happens to ask upon his return, I've not seen you."

Ram smiled at his co-conspirator. "You're a good man, Hawthorne." His mood lifted. It had been a while since he had engaged in a celebration of any kind. Unexpected excitement coursed through him at the thought of joining in the merriment. His betrothed could wait; he would investigate her on the morrow. Today he would enjoy himself to the fullest.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he strode toward the chambers he used when he came to Chesworth House. The luxurious suite of rooms where he'd spent precious little time in the course of the last decade had hardly changed since his childhood.

The muted light of the early morning sun struggled to penetrate the heavy blue and gold brocade drapery that covered the tall windows. His glance skittered toward the ornately carved mahogany bed of inviting proportion. Travel weary as he was, the idea of May Day revelry overshadowed the notion of sleep. He shed his clothing and stepped to the washbasin, using the pitcher and the cool water to clean away the grime of his journey. Then he padded across the thick blue rug to his wardrobe, contemplating what to wear.

Though the Civil War had ended with the restoration of King Charles II, Cornwall had been one of the few counties to remain fiercely loyal to the Stuart cause throughout the long years of exile. It was no secret Ram's father had been a staunch Parliamentarian, and Ram would likely receive an icy reception should his identity be

apparent. Though it *had* been years since he'd spent extended time in the county. Likely no one would even recognize him. But to be sure, he'd leave off the trappings of nobility and go to the village dressed plainly. Perhaps, as in his younger days, he'd find some pleasurable companionship for the evening.

Wearing a simple white shirt and a pair of worn, tan breeches, he returned to the stable and chose a fresh mount. He saddled Mercury, his favorite chestnut, and swung into the saddle. Perhaps the stallion sensed Ram's excitement to leave behind his cares for the day, or perhaps the notion of escaping the confines of his own stabled existence pleased him, but at the first squeeze of Ram's heels Mercury leapt beneath him like bottled lightning. Ram threw his head back and let the smells and sights of Cornwall fill his senses.

He'd forgotten how beautiful the countryside could be. The frigid fingers of winter had begun to release their grasp on the landscape, which in turn began to bloom, bathed in the life-sustaining warmth of the late spring sun. Fragile flowers unfurled their petals, perfuming the air with the sweet smells of bluebells and primrose, while birds chattered in the trees as they prepared their nests.

With his lagging spirits lifted by the beauty of the day, Ram made his way down from his father's manor toward the small village, a journey of less than a mile. He followed the bank of the River Camel, marveling at the lengths to which his father would go to find favor with the newly restored King.

Oh, he understood his father's motives, and he couldn't truly fault his sire, not all that much, at least. It was the manner in which

the Earl had gone about conducting the betrothal— behind Ram's back— as if he were a lad barely out of the schoolroom rather than a man of thirty, which rankled most. It was Ram's duty to marry well, and he was prepared to do just that, but to a bride of his own choosing. His father had known that when he'd betrothed him to a young lady who'd spent the whole of her adolescence in the courts on the Continent and occasionally with the young, exiled King. Ram had absolutely no use for a courtier as a bride- a woman who knew the fine nuances of flirting and giggling and scarce else.

"Whoa, boy!" He pulled hard on the reigns as a flash of white caught his eye.

Mercury was almost atop a girl on the riverbank. The stallion did some fancy footwork, somehow managing to avoid trampling her. The lass had hiked up her skirts, as though about to wade into the water. She dropped them as she jumped away from the horse, but not before he glimpsed a tantalizing view of nicely formed, pale calves.

On closer inspection, though she was quite short, it was apparent this was a woman full grown. The lass was no girl. Dressed in peasant clothing, a long full skirt flowed to her ankles, covered by a white apron. An equally white blouse peeked from beneath her close-fitting dark bodice. A kerchief draped around her neck and shoulders. All the layers of clothing couldn't hide her tiny waist and gently flaring hips, or the generous swell of her bosom.

Out of place was the unbound mass of chestnut curls flowing in a riotous wave over her shoulders and down her back, reaching almost to her hips. As she turned to face him, the rays of the mid morning

sun sent red and golden highlights dancing through her hair.

Her face was as delicate as the rest of her. Even from atop his horse he observed her skin was the smoothest he'd ever seen. Winged brows the same shade as her hair were raised over eyes whose color he couldn't discern from his vantage point. Her full lips were slightly parted in surprise at his intrusion.

His loins thickened. With any luck, he'd just stumbled upon his companionship for the evening.

He dismounted, tossed Mercury's reins into a bush, and noticed right away the source of her problem. She'd lost her cap and it was snagged upon some reeds in the water.

"Allow me to retrieve your cap, Madam." Without waiting for her assent, he stepped off the bank into the cool stream. His boots filled with cold water, but he paid them no mind as he waded towards the reeds. He had two dozen pairs of boots at home; one pair ruined in the pursuit of enjoyable bedsport was no great loss.

With white cap in hand, he returned to the bank, triumphant. Instead of looking as overwhelmingly pleased as he expected, she looked… amused. One delicate brow arched over eyes he could see now were a dark blue color that brought to mind sapphires.

A wry grin tipped up the corners of her sensuous mouth. "My thanks, sir, for your aid. That was most…chivalrous."

Taken aback, Ram paused. Sarcasm? Most maids of his acquaintance would have responded with simpering gratitude. She could have at least flirted with him in reply! Still, his interest rose another notch at her unexpected response. "Aye, it was that." He

couldn't stop the slow grin that pulled at his lips. "I would have hated to see you ruin your skirts to retrieve it."

"I am quite sure you would have. You are a knight without shining armor."

Her sarcasm rankled, until he caught her taking his measure, looking him over from head to toe. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. She liked what she saw. *A good start.*

As she took the cap from his hands and twisted her mane to stuff it back under the wisp of fabric, he nearly protested the loss of all that abundant shimmering hair. No matter. He'd have her hair down once more before the day ended, spread around them as he buried himself deep inside of her and fucked them both into oblivion.

He cleared his throat. "Are you on your way to the May Day celebration?" He motioned to his horse. "Perhaps I could escort you. A lady shouldn't be alone in the wild where all manner of predators abound."

She blinked. A sculpted brow rose. "Tell me sir; does a predator have me in his sights?"

***

Izzy tried to contain her delight at the banter between her and the deliciously handsome man before her.

Her May Day disguise emboldened her. Dressed as she was, she didn't have to act demure and restrained. She could be herself and not be deemed unladylike. With this costume came a freedom she'd rarely before experienced. It hadn't been hard to talk one of her maids into fetching the ensemble she now wore, as they were accustomed to her

oft-eccentric requests.

She took a closer look at the man standing before her, but didn't recognize him. Then again, she'd been gone so long during the war there were many local people she didn't know anymore.

A blacksmith perhaps, if the generous width of his shoulders beneath the simple white cambric shirt he wore was anything to go on. Or perhaps a stable hand, based on the quality of horseflesh he rode. Yet his speech was not the rough dialect of the peasantry. Mayhap a footman from a nearby manor? He was tall, towering over her by at least a head, his long legs encased in snug brown riding breeches that came to the knee, emphasizing his fine musculature. The stockings beneath disappeared into high black riding boots. Wavy black hair hung long, tied back in a queue. He wore no hat.

A very handsome man, indeed. He must be a footman; they were hired for their height and good looks.

While she openly examined him, he seemed to recover his decorum. "I daresay you *might* have been in extreme danger had I not stumbled upon you when I did. Don't you know wolves and other beasties prowl these woods, seeking fair damsels to prey upon?" His gray eyes twinkled as he cast one hand in the direction of the trees.

Utterly charmed, she went along with his banter. "But I have always been warned that wolves oftentimes come disguised as sheep. Your intentions seem noble, but tell me, good sir, how do I know you are not a wolf in sheep's clothing?"

He grinned, leaning closer. "I can be both wolf and sheep, should the situation warrant it."

The husky tone of his voice curled her toes. His features were so handsome, a thrill coursed along her spine.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “Alas, today I am but a simple man, on a mission to save unsuspecting maids from all manner of trouble. And since I so bravely saved your life, I now have the responsibility of you.

She laughed. “You saved my *cap*, Sir!”

“Well yes, but had I not wandered along, you might have gone after it yourself and become swept up in the current and drowned.”

Casting a wry grin at the shallow, slow moving water, she raised an eyebrow to make her point, then glanced back at him.

He gave another long-suffering sigh. “How could I know whether or not you swim? Nay, there’s no help for it, I’m afraid. I am responsible for your well-being for the rest of this day at least, madam.”

He tucked an errant strand of her hair back under the cap and she went still at such a familiar gesture. A frisson of heat passed from his body into hers at his touch. She started, the banter forgotten, and he sobered, taking a step back.

He leaned against his horse and contemplated her for a long moment. When he spoke again his voice was much subdued. “If you were going to the May Day celebrations I would now be honor bound to give you escort.”

“As a matter of fact, I’m on my way to Wadebridge for that very purpose, but my cap decided it ought to go for a swim.”

He smiled. “You don’t wish to go a bit further to Padstow,

instead? 'Tis a much more exuberant affair."

She'd heard about the famous celebrations that took place each year in the small harbor town. Aside from the regular May Day revelry, the folks of Padstow engaged in the 'Obby 'Oss festival, a sight she'd never been privy too, but one she'd always had a keen interest in. "I fear Padstow is too far to travel by foot."

His wicked grin returned and he waggled raven eyebrows at her in a suggestive manner. "Then it's a good thing I wandered upon you when I did. I daresay my mount could handle the extra weight should you wish escort to Padstow."

It went against everything she'd ever been taught, to be so familiar with a man, and a stranger at that. But dear God, he intrigued her so very much! And she was on an important mission. It was conceivable she could use this chance meeting to her advantage. This man *was* very handsome; perhaps she might seduce him into doing what needed to be done. What she'd planned specifically to do this day if she could but keep her nerve.

She would keep her nerve. She *must.*

Her sense of humor rose to the fore. How appropriate might it be if she played the sacrificial lamb to this wolf? Besides, recognition was far less likely in Padstow than in Wadebridge.

Instead of answering, she offered her hand. He hoisted her onto his horse and leapt up behind her, his arms reaching around her to take the reins. Of course, he wouldn't place her on the horse as if she were riding side saddle; he thought her a servant, never a lady. It was thrilling to sit astride a horse, even if she did have to hike her skirts to

her knees to do so, but that was exciting and titillating too. As she adjusted them as best she could over her legs, she was keenly aware of the hardness of his chest pressed against her back, the feel of his arms against her sides, and the heat that seemed to leap from his body to hers. She shivered.

"Are you chilled?" His voice was almost a whisper, his mouth hovering just over the sensitive skin of her ear.

She shook her head. "Only excited. I've never been to Padstow before."

"You'll have a most pleasurable time," his voice dropped, taking on a husky quality. "I guarantee it.

# Chapter 2

Ram couldn't be more pleased. He was about to partake in celebrations he hadn't experienced since his youth. A day filled with mindless revelries, good food, and delicious drink awaited. A chance to leave the worries of impending nuptials and other duties behind for a time. And most of all, he had a beautiful and willing woman sitting practically in his lap as he rode.

Content to let Mercury meander along the path, he concentrated on the bundle of femininity in his arms. The delicate scent of lavender wafted from the few strands of hair dangling from her cap. It teased his senses, keeping him in a constant state of semi-arousal. With her buttocks pressed so close, could she feel his loins thickening through her skirts? A smile pulled at his lips. Later this evening, he'd take an entirely different kind of ride.

Shifting the reins, he let his arm brush the side of her breast. She started slightly but didn't pull away. He was glad she faced away from him and couldn't see the grin that split his face. Oh aye, he'd ride well tonight.

Touching his lips to her ear, he whispered, "'Tis not often I rescue a damsel in distress. Does my damsel have a name?"

She twisted her head around to look at him, chewing her lip, and he had the feeling she was trying to hide a grin.

"My name is Izzy."

“A unique name. May I be so familiar as to call you Izzy?”

Now she did smile. “You may, good sir.” She shifted around further to look him fully in the face, her backside rubbing against his groin as she did so. He stifled a groan.

“And by what name should I call you?”

*Randy? Lascivious? Lover?* He clamped down his unruly thoughts. “My name is Julian. Julian James.”

The alias wasn’t a lie, exactly, he’d just left off both his given and surname. He’d used the name in the past, but for more clandestine and official matters, not flings and romps. But “Julian James” fit the plain trappings and simple guise he currently wore far better than Ramsay Maitland, Viscount Royston.

“Julian.” She tested his name, and he found the sight of her full lips as they curved into a smile almost too much to resist. But he would resist. The signs made him fairly sure she’d be amenable to his love play by the end of this day, but he wouldn’t risk scaring her off early by importuning her too quickly. Nay, he’d ply her with a bit of ale and good food before he laid his cloak on the ground for them.

They continued down the path in a comfortable silence, and gradually she began to settle against him so his chest bore her weight. Her warmth seeped through his thin shirt, and the feel of her, so soft and curvy, left him relaxed and comfortable. Content. As she looked about taking in the surroundings, he took the opportunity to study her more closely.

She was feminine and alluring, a true beauty. Though she exhibited excitement over the journey, there was serenity and

confidence etched into those delicate features. She held herself like a woman who knew her place in the world and was comfortable in her own skin, yet her petite stature lent her an air of fragility. If he was a betting man, he'd lay odds on her being a member of the landed gentry, yet her coarse homespun clothing spoke of humble means. An intriguing mix, but one he intended to get to the bottom of. He ever did enjoy a good mystery.

He couldn't help but compare her to the image he'd formed of his betrothed. All he knew of *her* was that she was a spoiled courtier who'd spent the last decade in exile with the King and his court. She'd probably scoff at the idea of mingling with the commoners for a day of festivity, let alone wear the garb of one!

*Cease!* There would be plenty of time to think about his upcoming nuptials tomorrow. Today was about his pleasure. And the pleasure of the woman he held in his arms.

The scent of the sea assailed his nostrils; they approached Padstow. 'Twas a shame, really, he wasn't quite ready to relinquish her from his lap and his arms.

As flat verdant land gave way to the beginnings of city streets, the road became congested with other revelers as they crept closer to town. The woodsy smells of the outdoors became overpowered by the scents of cooking fires and roasting food.

"Look at the decorations!" Izzy breathed as she took in the sights about them on the High Street in wonder, bending forward in an attempt to get a better view. The sight of her backside pressed to his groin as she leaned over the front of the horse brought all sorts of

wicked images to his mind.

*What is the matter with me?* He was reacting as though he was some untried youth about to have his first taste of a woman. Disgusted, he struggled to rein in his lust.

The buildings along the High Street were all gaily decorated with ribbons and banners, flags, and greenery of all sorts. Many of the regular market stalls were closed for the day; those vendors with wares to appeal to the revelers hawked items in the street. Residents and visitors alike were already in full fledged celebration mode, most of them having greeted the day as tradition dictated, at midnight on May Eve. Izzy twisted to and fro in the saddle, every movement exquisite torture as she rubbed against his nether parts, which swelled and throbbed with each bit of contact.

By the time Ram chose an inn at which to stable Mercury, he was almost grateful to escape his seat of torment. Leaping down from the great horse, he reached for Izzy and plucked her from the saddle, holding her high in the air with his hands at her waist. Instead of setting her to the ground, he pulled her close and let her slid down his body in a slow, sensuous motion. For a moment she hung suspended against him. Through the plain fabric of the shirt he wore, the hardened peaks of her breasts bored into the flat planes of his chest. Her eyes widened and her mouth formed an ‘o’, but she didn’t protest when he finally placed her gently on her feet. He bit back a grin. Without words he’d just made a promise to her of what was to come before the day was through, and by not pushing him away, she’d acquiesced.

Not only had she not offered even a token protest, now she leaned against him. He appreciated a woman who didn't play games, who didn't beckon him closer with one hand while keeping him at a distance with the other.

An urge to kiss her so overwhelmed him, he didn't resist it. Bending his head toward her, he brushed his lips across hers once, then again, before retreating a step back. If he didn't take control of himself, he'd have her upstairs in a room with her skirts thrown over her head before she could even voice a protest, and they'd miss the May Day merriment. For himself, well, he wouldn't mind so much, but she seemed so excited by the prospect of the celebrations he couldn't take that away from her.

"Come," he murmured, "let's find some refreshment and then we'll join the revelry."

He tossed a shilling at a stable lad and left Mercury in his care, then led Izzy around the building to the entrance of the inn.

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Izzy whirled from the gentle kiss. This man took such liberties, and they'd only just met! But then, didn't that make him the perfect man for what she planned? She'd been kissed before, of course, but even Paul had not been so bold as to do so without first asking permission.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. There was no way she would let her marital dilemma interfere with this day. If she came to that bridge she'd cross it, but for now she would enjoy herself. An

entire day of freedom stretched before her in this strange new town with an exciting man at her side. A day without chaperones and companions to keep her in line and curtail her enthusiasm. She could hardly wait!

She followed Julian to the door of the inn, noting his impeccable manners as he held it open for her to precede him inside. Delicious smells wafted around her as she stepped within the old timber framed building with its charming low ceilings and distinctive medieval feel. Though the weather was on the warmer side, a cheerful fire burned in the hearth, chasing away any lingering early morning chill. The scent of roasting capons and freshly baked bread assailed her senses. Her stomach rumbled in response, a reminder of how fast she'd fled her home this morning lest she be caught by her cousin Belinda on the way out.

The inn was crowded. Mixed with the tantalizing aroma of food was the smell of unwashed humanity arising from the close press of bodies as they celebrated. Wrinkling her nose, she drank it all in with fascination. Julian took the lead, shouldering his way through the throng of people until he found an empty table. Holding out a rickety wooden chair, he waited until she was settled before seating himself across from her.

A plump serving wench ambled over to the table. Though dressed in a manner similar to Izzy, the woman weighed at least two stone more, and her blouse was much snugger, forcing her ample bosom to overflow the fabric. Her pretty, rounded face and cornflower blue eyes lit with licentious interest as she took Julian's measure. With

a saucy wink the barmaid settled a hip against the table, then leaned toward Julian, impeding Izzy's view of him

The urge to grab the wench's lanky yellow hair and tear her away from Julian consumed Izzy. She clenched her fists beneath the table instead, confused by the unusual urge. Good Lord, she'd kept Paul's attention from even the most experienced and beautiful of courtesans, surely she wasn't insecure over the crude charms of a serving wench who looked like a dairy maid?

"Me name's Wanda. Wot's yer pleasure, handsome?" The wench leaned even closer. In another instant she'd be in his lap! There was no doubt Julian was getting an eyeful of her bountiful cleavage. "I can serve any need ye have."

Gritting her teeth, Izzy willed herself to be calm.

She might be an innocent, but she recognized a proposition when she heard one, and she'd be damned if she'd let this woman get her hands on Julian before she, herself, had her chance with him.

As it turned out, her concern was for naught. An expression of distaste crossed Julian's face as he leaned around the woman to meet Izzy's gaze. "The lady and I will each take a pasty and a mug of ale." With a quick flick of a coin in Wanda's direction, he dismissed her. "Be quick about it."

Wanda scowled, but took the shilling from the table willingly enough and hurried off.

Julian turned his gaze upon Izzy and again that strange, feverish feeling crept over her skin. She fervently hoped she wasn't becoming ill. Illness would wreak havoc on her well-laid plans.

“So, Izzy, tell me, from whence do you hail?” Julian’s smoky grey eyes were riveted upon her.

Recovering her equilibrium, she thought about his question, debating how much to reveal. “I live not far from Wadebridge.” That was honest enough.

“You live with your family then, in the village?”

“I live only with my mother.”

He seemed to relax a tiny bit at her words. Had he perhaps thought she was married? Or was he concerned she had a big, angry papa?

“Your mother did not wish to partake in the festivities?”

“I’m afraid Mama suffers from beliefs of a more puritanical persuasion.” She forced the lie through her lips. “She doesn’t know I have come.” At least that was the truth.

“Ah, I see. And how do you know your secret shall be safe with me.”

“I do not, Sir. I must rely on you to be a gentleman.” In all truth, she prayed he wouldn’t act the gentleman! She was depending on it, in fact!

“Hmm. I shall keep your secret, but I will require payment in exchange.”

“What sort of payment?”

“I’ve not decided yet, but I’ll know it at some time during the day and you will pay my price.”

He sent her a lazy wink just as Wanda returned to the table with their food and drink, and Izzy tingled at the attention he

bestowed upon her. Which was ridiculous. She'd been flirted with by dukes, counts, barons, and all manner of men in between and never experienced a reaction like this! Not even Paul had ever made her hot, yet shivery at the same time.

Wanda thumped a trencher before her and Izzy concentrated on the food and drink, no longer worried the serving wench might be competition. Parched from her journey, she took a draught of ale. She wasn't prepared for the sour taste of the stuff, as she usually drank wine or sherry. It was hard to keep from choking on the bitter brew.

Julian didn't seem to have the same problem. He took a large swallow, and the sight of the muscles of his throat as they worked mesmerized her. With a hard swallow of her own, she turned her attention to the pasty, which in contrast to the ale, was delicious. Before she knew it, she had eaten every bite and licked her fingers clean. She'd even begun to quaff ale to wash down her food, becoming accustomed to the taste of it.

Glancing up from the empty trencher, she found Julian's eyes locked on her, staring with what could only be described as hunger. Once again, heat rose in her face under his close scrutiny.

At a loss for words, relief coursed through her when the door to the pub opened and the sounds of merriment carried through. She craned her neck to see what was happening.

"Come." Julian commanded, but his tone was soft. "Let's join the fun, shall we?" He stood, holding out his hand. Without hesitation she placed her palm in his, relishing that strange jolt again as his large fingers weaved between her much smaller ones. As impossible as it

seemed, she already felt safe with him as he led her to the door.

Outside, the world had erupted into chaos. Throngs of people filled the narrow streets, chanting and singing, and the crowd seemed to travel in a singular direction. Helpless to prevent being dragged along, she didn't fight it, letting the horde of people carry her forward. Julian's firm grip anchored her to him.

The sun was high in the sky as they passed shops and homes covered with bluebells, forget-me-nots, and cowslip in honor of the merry day, and reached their destination, the site of the Maypole. It was an enormous thing, larger than any she had ever seen. Ribbons of every color adorned the pole and children laughed and skipped around it with glee. Almost every girl wore a garland of flowers in her hair and Izzy felt out of place, wishing she too had one of the beautiful wreaths to adorn her hair. Julian noticed as well, for he gave a gentle tug on her hand and led her to a vendor selling a varied assortment of the festive accessory stacked upon a pole with thin wooden beams.

"Give me your cap," Julian shouted above the noise of the revelers.

She yanked off her white cap with delight, shaking her head to let her hair tumble down her back. Catching Julian's gaze, she could have sworn his eyes smoldered, but the look disappeared as he took her cap and chuckled to himself. "Which would you like?"

She chose a beautiful garland made of purple lavender and heather, entwined around the darkest of twigs. Julian handed the vendor a coin, then placed the garland on her head. Once satisfied it

was secure, he ran both hands through the length of her hair. The light touch made her shiver.

“Beautiful,” he whispered against her ear, then gently tugged her back toward the maypole.

That peculiar warmth filled her again but she had no time to think on it, as Julian took her into his arms and they began a lively country dance. Years of nothing but proper, courtly dances fell away as she found the rhythm of the music. As her feet performed the steps, it seemed as though she’d danced this way only yesterday, rather than almost a decade ago.

They flew round and round, circling the maypole in abandon with the other revelers. She felt like a princess in a fairy tale, being wooed by her very own prince. Excitement filled her. Everything that should have been forbidden to her —the dancing, the singing, the drinking, and most of all, the soul-deep desire to be in the arms of this man, a perfect stranger— intoxicated instead.

They danced and sang for what seemed hours, stopping only every while for Julian to fetch a mug of ale, which they shared to quench their thirst. Around them people sang refrains of the May Day Song,

“With the merry ring, adieu the merry spring,
For summer is acome unto day,
How happy is the little bird that merrily doth sing
In the merry morning of May.”

The singing stopped when the prettiest young maids from the town lined up as if on cue. Fascinated, Izzy turned to watch the

ceremony, leaning back against Julian's chest for support. His arms came around her waist, pulling her tighter to him then leaned his chin on her shoulder. Even in this large group of people who stood with them, Julian's embrace was so intimate it was as if they were the only two people who existed in that place, in that moment.

The crowd roared its agreement as a lovely maiden was chosen May Queen and they hefted her into a flower-bedecked chair to be paraded about. The girl chosen was young, but pretty, and Izzy clapped her approval along with the rest of the crowd.

The sound of drums filled the air. Izzy twisted her head and saw a procession making its way down the street at a slow pace. Soon a costumed creature came into sight, the likes of which Izzy had never seen before. It resembled a horse of sorts, yet it was draped in a black cape and wore a hideous mask. It moved in rhythm to the drums in a bizarre sort of dance. A young man dressed in gay colors danced around the thing, poking it occasionally with a stick. Izzy tilted her head back against Julian's shoulder and met his gaze, confounded.

He bent his head so his lips were near her ear. "'Tis the 'Obby 'Oss!"

A feminine squeal drew her attention from Julian and she looked in time to see the 'Obby 'Oss dance its way toward a young woman. Delighted, Izzy watched as the girl laughed and evaded its clutches, though the next woman was not so lucky. The creature drew it's victim beneath the cape and gyrated as the crowd looked on and cheered.

As it made its way closer, the beat of the drums filled Izzy,

enflaming her, and she began to move in time with the sound. So engrossed in the music, she didn't notice the 'Obby 'Oss until it was almost atop her. Just as she was about to be enfolded under the black cape, strong hands grabbed her, lifting her away.

Julian set her down with her back against a building, a wide grin upon his face. "'Tis said if you are caught beneath the black cape you'll fall pregnant within the year."

His words immediately led her thoughts down the path of sin; thoughts no virtuous maiden ought to have. But wasn't sin the exact reason she'd come here today? Julian's sensual lips transfixed her at the reminder. He sobered as if he realized the direction her thoughts had taken. Suddenly his eyes blazed and his nostrils flared.

"I'll take my payment now," He growled.

In the next moment, he pinned her against the wall of a building with his hard body, while his lips molded to hers. His kiss stole every thought, until Izzy had no recollection of what payment he spoke of.

His scent and taste filled every sense and Izzy felt so alive, so emboldened. Her heart matched the rhythm of the pounding drums and she dared not hold back. As his mouth swept over hers, Izzy relinquished control. Her arms went about his neck; she buried her fingers into his thick mane and returned the kiss with everything she had.

His mouth consumed and demanded. His teeth nibbled at her lips and then his tongue forced her mouth to part and swept inside, capturing her gasp of pleasure at the bold intrusion. His body pressed

against her, all hard angles and flat planes, and she melted into him.

She'd been kissed before, but nothing on Earth could have prepared her for *this!*

She was on fire.

# Chapter 3

Ram was on fire.

Need exploded through him as she responded to his scorching kiss, answering the demands of his hungry mouth as fervently as he made them. Her lips were sweetness and sin, a simultaneous essence of innocence and ale. The taste of her drove him wild, sent the blood flowing from every part of his body straight to his loins as he pressed her harder against the wall, settling his knee between her thighs.

His hands tangled in her hair as he cradled her head, knocking the garland flying to the ground. His mouth trailed from her lips down the slender column of her throat, licking at the vein there that pulsed with the force of her desire. She gasped, and the breathy, mewling sound arrowed straight into him. His cock jumped against her soft belly. He ground his hips against hers.

Her hands moved down his back, pulling him closer. Returning to her mouth, his tongue dueled with hers. He'd never get enough of this woman. Sliding his hands down her side, then back up again, he cupped a breast in each palm while he raised the leg between hers so she could ride his thigh. She gasped again but made no protest, and he began to knead her breasts through her thin blouse. Their lush firmness filled his hands to perfection, as though her body had been made for him. He squeezed her nipples gently, rolling them between the forefinger and thumb of each hand as his mouth suckled on her lower lip. She moaned aloud against his ear, writhing under his touch,

hips arching as she pleasured herself against him. The need to bury himself deep inside her luscious little body drove him wild.

He froze. What was he doing? He was not an untried youth who couldn't keep from taking a woman up against a wall! He tore his hands and mouth from her, leaning his forehead against the cold stone of the building, hearing the raw sound of his own panting mixed with hers.

Lifting his head, he stared down at the girl in his arms. This slip of femininity threatened to unman him, right there on the street, practically in plain view of what could only be described as a mob of revelers. Surely he hadn't been so out of control since he'd had his first woman.

She breathed heavily, her chest heaving with exertion. With extreme difficulty, he tore his gaze from those perfect breasts, trying not to linger on the sight of her impudent nipples straining against the fabric of her gown. He forced himself to meet her gaze. Her eyes were glassy, unfocused, still caught in the heat of the moment. If he didn't regain control, he was going to take her against the building, revelers be damned.

He stroked a finger down her cheek and her lips parted with obvious surprise. Well, he'd had quite the shock himself.

Had he ever responded to a woman so powerfully? He doubted it.

Her tongue darted out to lick her lips. The simple motion speared him with desire all over again.

"Shall we get some refreshments?" The hoarseness of his own

voice startled him. He needed something, anything, to distract him from how delectable she looked standing there, her hair disheveled, her lips plump and moist from his kisses, begging for more. She looked wanton and adorable and beautiful as hell. He wanted her exactly like this beneath him, in his bed.

How much more of the festivities would she want to see? They didn't officially end until midnight, but if they left now he could find a comfortable inn in Wadebridge and hole up with her for the evening. Finding a room here in Padstow so late would be difficult, if not utterly impossible.

It didn't matter. He only needed to find a private room with a bed, and he needed to find it soon.

She seemed to shake herself out of the kiss-induced stupor, and threw a tremulous smile in his direction. "I should very much like a drink."

With a curt nod he took her hand, then led her into the street and back amidst the throng. He found a vendor and bought another tankard of ale, which she shyly accepted. Her hand trembled as she took the mug.

That kiss had left him parched as well, so he purchased another. Just as he was about to ask if she was amenable to leaving for Wadebridge now, her attention was caught again by the festivities. She seemed entranced as a man on stilts went by while juggling. Ram sighed. 'Twas obvious she still very much wanted to partake of the celebrations. He would have to keep control over his lust a while longer.

They soon found themselves back at the village green, where dancers still moved to the beat of the music. Archery competitions had been set up and he stood beside her to watch the men show off their skills with the bow.

As the sky began to darken, the festivities started to wind down. Exhausted children fell asleep on their feet and parents hurried to get them home to their beds. Ram and Izzy took a quick meal, but not wanting to miss the last of the entertainment, they drank more than they ate. He grabbed her hand, hurrying to catch the culmination of the day, when the 'Obby 'Oss was put back into his stable at the *Golden Lion*, to await next year's celebration.

Finally, after what seemed like forever to Ram, they made their way to the inn where the day had started, to retrieve Mercury. Ram walked beside Izzy, hurrying to catch her as she stumbled. When she looked up into his eyes with a wide smile, comprehension dawned. She was foxed!

Damn! He'd plied her with drink for refreshment sake, and, if he were totally honest with himself, perhaps to lower her inhibitions a bit as well. He'd not meant to make her bosky!

He stopped and put his hand beneath her chin, lifting her face to his. "Izzy, sweetheart, are you well?"

"Aye, Julian." She bestowed a big, toothy smile upon him. "I've had the most wonderful day!"

"Have you had too much ale?"

She scrunched her face adorably in thought as she considered the question. "I'm not at all sure. I'm not accustomed to drinking ale,

you see. I didn't even like it this morn, but it's grown on me. I *do* feel rather strange, now that I think upon it."

He groaned low. She'd been drinking at a steady pace all day. Plans for a night spent romping beneath the bed sheets fast dwindled away.

"Come, let's get you home." He sighed with resignation. He might be a libertine of the highest order, but he did not debauch women when they were too inebriated to participate in their debauchment.

After reclaiming Mercury, he helped her into the saddle, then hoisted himself behind her. She wriggled as she tried to get comfortable, an action that left him distinctly uncomfortable. He was glad when she settled down as he guided the horse from the coast towards Wadebridge.

She was asleep within minutes, leaning against his chest, trusting him in a way that pulled at his heartstrings. He tightened his arms about her to hold her steady as they journeyed on. Sitting behind her, he inhaled her delicate scent. She smelled of sunshine and festivity. She was springtime in his arms. It had been a long time since he'd known such contentment with a woman. Perhaps he'd actually never been more content with any woman.

*I could make her my mistress.*

Ram sat straighter as he considered the idea. He hadn't even bedded her yet. Still, could there be any real doubt as to their compatibility in the bedchamber, given their mutual physical attraction and the way they burned when they touched?

He was about to be saddled with a wife he didn't want. A woman all but guaranteed to be shallow, vain, and insipid. No doubt she'd wish to remain in London, at Charles's court, where Ram had no desire to live. He'd never intended to even pay lip service to his wedding vows and doubted very much his betrothed intended so either. Court life was rife with indiscretion and licentious behavior. Ram had intended to keep his current mistress, Louisa, after his wedding, but her appeal had waned of late, and compared to Izzy, Louisa didn't hold a candle. As no man wanted to handle more than one mistress at a time, the choice was an easy one. If Izzy was amenable, he'd end his relationship with Louisa in a trice. Cornwall could become his escape, Izzy's arms his haven.

Resting his chin atop her head, he smiled. He'd enjoy showering her with luxuries, watching her enjoy the best his money could buy- things she'd probably never dreamed of having.

Of course, he mustn't rush her or he chanced scaring her off. He also needed to mull over the idea of making her his mistress when he himself wasn't half-flown with ale and aroused to the point of madness. Initially he'd intended to be in Cornwall only long enough to sneak a peek at his bride-to-be, but now his plans changed. He'd stay for a time.

Ram reluctantly awoke her when they reached their destination since he didn't know where she lived. She peered up at him with groggy eyes as she tried to clear her head, looking around as if surprised to find herself back in Wadebridge so soon. Disappointment flitted across her unguarded features and he allowed himself to savor

her flattering reaction. She was as sorry to leave his company as he was to let her go.

"Where is your home?" He asked low.

She shook her head with vehemence. "N-nay. Mama mustn't see me come home with you. Please, I don't live far; I'll be all right to walk the rest of the way."

He frowned, not liking the idea of leaving her alone in the dead of night. If she were a lady there was nothing that would keep him from taking her to her very door. But she wasn't a lady, and likely quite used to taking care of herself, and so he'd abide by her wishes.

Loath to let her go, he entreated her, "Meet me on the morrow?"

She studied him for a moment, head cocked to the side. Then she nodded and her lips turned up in a smile. He released a breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding.

"Where?" she asked.

"At the riverbank, where we met this morn?"

"I'll be there at noon!" She started to turn away, but he grabbed a hold of her arm, pulling her back into his embrace. He lowered his head and brushed his mouth over hers.

"Until tomorrow."

Her breath hitched in her throat and she smiled again. "Tomorrow." And then she hurried away from him, toward a street enshrouded in darkness.

Ram stared after her in a rare moment of uncertainty. Perhaps he should follow from a discreet distance. Make certain she would be

safe. But even though it was one of the busiest nights of the year, the streets were quiet and no one seemed to be about. Anyone with a lick of sense was taking advantage of the festival; cozying up with their lovers in bedrooms, barns, fields— even under the bushes. That old childhood ditty flashed through his mind; 'Hooray, hooray, the first of May! Outdoor fucking starts today!' Well, for everyone else, apparently. Letting his head fall back, Ram laughed at himself and the situation. When his mirth had run its course, Izzy was lost from sight.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the white cap she'd lost that morning and brought it to his nose, inhaling her delicate scent. Faintly aroused once more, he warmed himself instead with thoughts of what he would do with her on the morrow, and turned Mercury towards his father's stable.

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Izzy strode down the cobbled street, panicked. She'd never intended to stay out so late. And now Julian had dropped her off in Wadebridge, and she still had over a mile to tread to reach her home. Had she been missed yet?

She scurried towards a building that cast a looming shadow and, safely out of sight, turned to see whether Julian would follow or not. He stared in her direction for a moment and she could swear she heard laughter, but then he turned Mercury around and trotted off. She breathed a sigh of relief.

When he was no longer visible, she reversed direction and hurried out of the village. The journey ahead seemed immense, but certainly that was due to the pounding in her head. Damn and blast!

She never should have drank so much ale. Her overindulgence had cost her what she most desired and what she'd set out this day to achieve.

Even with an aching head and a mouth that tasted as if she'd sucked on a woolen sock, she shivered with excitement at the memory of her stolen moments with Julian. She'd had the most enjoyable day of her life, and she intended to thank him for it on the morrow, in a *very* improper manner. Despite the liberties he'd taken with her, he'd remained a gentleman for the most part. But it was not a gentleman she needed now. She'd seen the signs. Beneath the courteous exterior, Julian was all virile male. Just thinking about the kisses they'd shared was enough to set her pulse hammering in her veins.

Had she not indulged in so many tankards of ale, she'd no doubt be in his arms right now. When he'd woken her when they'd arrived in Wadebridge, the disappointment was so keen it had snatched her breath.

But none of that mattered now. He wanted to see her again! She hugged herself in happiness and relief.

She sped her pace, chewing her lip as she rehashed the argument she'd had with her cousin last week. Had Belinda correctly guessed the reason behind her disappearance today and ratted her out? Belinda was her second cousin through her mother's aunt, and her closest friend in the world; they'd been raised together like sisters. But Bel had always been more straight-laced and less willing to step outside proper boundaries.

Belinda thought Izzy should cease fighting her family and

accept her fate. And though Izzy had always believed the choice of husband would be hers to make, she'd intended to do just that and abide by her word…until the day the betrothal agreement had been signed. Her future husband couldn't even be bothered to come in person to put his name to the paper. Unable to tear himself away from his revelries in London, the Viscount had sent his solicitor as proxy to sign in his place. Given away for coin and land by her father, yet unwanted by her future husband, Izzy had become nothing more than an afterthought.

She'd snatched the document from Papa's hand to read it herself, much to the horror of her betrothed's proxy. To Papa's credit, he'd allowed her to read it all, ever a firm believer that women should be involved in the political and social process affecting their lives. Then he'd duly signed the contract without hearing her out further, trading her away for his own political and financial means.

Even now the terms of that document made her burn. The first part was straightforward enough. The date and time of the nuptials were laid out, along with the money and land to trade hands when the families were joined.

The part of the contract pertaining specifically to her had been most appalling. If they'd been trying apurpose to insult her, they couldn't have done a better job. Written out on the parchment in exacting detail were her future "duties" as the wife of such an elevated peer of the realm. All was described in meticulous detail— from the appropriate clothing she would wear, to the proper way she'd handle herself when amongst other peers— as if they feared she

might be so lacking she didn't already know how a lady should behave!

But the most galling stipulation of all was the clause dealing with the matter of her virtue. Ever an issue to a nobleman lest his all-important title go to a brat not of his blood, the contract stated that should it bear out she was no virgin on the wedding night, an annulment would be duly sought. It was a usual expectation and there was already a remedy at law should that bear out, but to put it into a betrothal agreement was unheard of! An insult! 'Twas almost as if her betrothed *wanted* her to cry off from marrying him. If it hadn't been meant as an insult then it could only be that her betrothed was truly puritanical, not simply a parliamentarian. She shuddered at the very idea.

She'd expected Papa to explode at the insinuation she might not be virtuous and do just that— tell the proxy where he could take the betrothal and shove it—, but Papa had taken it in stride, as though such clauses were commonplace. He'd not seen it as an affront to her character. That Papa hadn't objected was proof of just how desperate for coin he really was.

Panic had set in, for she realized then her father was blinded by the money and the land. It was one thing to marry a roundhead for the sake of her family. But a man who couldn't be bothered to put in an appearance to even *meet* her, and who could force her to sign a degrading contract with such rigid stipulations? What kind of life was she destined for with a man such as that? As much as she wanted to do right by her family, she couldn't do it. She was not like most of the

other unmarried young women she knew. She'd spent nearly a decade living in exile on the Continent, where she'd lived with a fair degree of freedom. She'd never been loose with her morals, of course, but the thought of binding herself for life to a man who sounded like nothing more than a stuffy puritan seemed as dire as a life sentence. She'd resolved anew to find a way to avoid the marriage.

Desperation cooled into resolution as she approached the house. She *had* found a way to avoid the marriage, she reminded herself, and his name was Julian. The memory of his warm grey eyes and soft lips made her smile. He was perfect. Perfect for the plan her cousin Belinda had unwittingly hatched upon the casual observation that if Izzy were no longer a virgin the requirements of the accursed marital contract would be broken.

As soon as Belinda said the words, Izzy had known that was the answer to her desperate plight. If she was no longer virgin, she could no longer satisfy the terms of the betrothal. Though she'd always imagined Paul would be the one to take her virginity, she didn't fear giving it to a man like Julian. After all, she had spent most of her life amongst exiled courtiers and French aristocracy, and the French never shied away from discussing affairs of the heart. She knew what lovemaking involved, why, she'd wandered upon couples more than once in flagrante delicto in some secluded spot in one palace or another. She had no fear of the sexual act. There would be some pain the first time, and then, with the right man, there'd be only pleasure. What was there to fear?

Julian was the right man. She was convinced of it.

There were only three weeks and four days until the wedding. Only three days if she took into account it was well after midnight and now officially Thursday. But thanks to Julian, by this time tomorrow she would no longer be a virgin and her betrothed would cry off. Everything would be well. If Paul didn't return for her, she'd choose another man to wed, one that would please both her father and herself. Giving away her virtue before marriage wasn't a wanton act, it was a desperate one!

A breeze sighed through the trees and she shivered, wishing she'd thought to bring a cloak. But then, she hadn't meant to be out so very late. Her darkened home loomed like an impenetrable fortress ahead. How was she to get inside unnoticed and unseen? She dared not try the front door, lest the butler hear and remark to her parents about her late entry. Creeping around to the servants' entrance in the back of the house, she tried the door, surprised to find it spring open beneath her fingers. Sending fervent thanks to whatever higher power was watching over her, she quickly locked the door and scurried up the back stairs, not stopping until she was safely in her chamber.

She slipped inside and as quietly as possible let the door close, then turned around and nearly jumped out of her skin to find a night-rail clad Belinda sitting in a chair, awaiting her return.

"Where have you been?" Her cousin cried, rising from the chair so abruptly she upended the book on her lap.

Izzy wasn't expecting Belinda to be so distressed. "I've been at the village, partaking of the May Day celebrations."

"I thought you ran away. I told your parents you were ill and

wouldn't be downstairs today and that I would care for you, but I began to think I made a terrible mistake. Had you not come home within the next hour I was going to wake your father and tell him everything."

Izzy embraced her hard. "Oh, Belinda, you're the best friend anyone could ask for. Did you leave the servants' entrance unlocked for me?"

Belinda pushed away from her in a violent motion. "I did. Where have you been?" She wrinkled her nose. "You smell like ale, horse, and man."

"I told you, I was celebrating the May Day."

"With a man?"

"There were many men there, Bel."

Her cousin rolled her eyes. "Don't play coy with me, Izzy. Did you give up your virtue, as you threatened?"

Izzy sighed, glad to be able to tell the truth about this one thing at least. "I swear to you, my virginity is as intact as it was when I left this house this morning."

Belinda heaved a great sigh of relief. "I've been worried sick all day."

"I'm truly sorry, Bel. I didn't know you would be so concerned."

"What was I to think after your mad talk last week of letting a stranger take your virtue?"

"It's not madness to want to find a way to be with the man I love."

Belinda's blue eyes widened with horror. "No reputable man

will ever marry you if you gain a reputation as a woman of loose morals. Think you Paul would have you with such a reputation?"

"Paul loves me. He would understand if I need take drastic measures to avoid a marriage to one of Cromwell's cronies."

Even as she said the words, a twinge of doubt stabbed her. Paul was every bit a nobleman as any other. He wouldn't want to tread where others had gone before. But he loved her. Surely, when she explained her reasoning he would understand her desperation. Especially when she reminded him she'd been driven to such an extreme act because he'd not come for her as he'd promised. If only she'd received any communication from him, hinting at when he might return to claim her!

Too weary to argue and afraid her arguments might raise Belinda's suspicions, Izzy capitulated. "'Twas just talk on my part, and well you know it. Come, it's late, and I'm exhausted. Can we discuss this tomorrow?"

Belinda nodded. "I think it best I sleep in here, lest your parents disbelieve I've been caring for you all evening."

*Damn and double damn.* It would be much harder to slip away for her rendezvous with Julian in the morning if Belinda were underfoot. Still, she owed her cousin for all she'd done this day. In light of that, Izzy forced a smile and pulled out the truckle bed for her cousin, as she'd done hundreds of times before.

When they were both in their beds and the lamps had been extinguished, she listened to Belinda's breathing turn even, a sure sign her cousin was fast asleep. Izzy couldn't slip into the same state of

bliss. Memories of smoky grey eyes filled with promise and a white-toothed grin set into a chiseled jaw haunted her, set her heart pounding.

Morning couldn't arrive soon enough.

# Chapter 4

Ram waited in his father's study first thing the next morning. After everything that happened yesterday, it was even clearer now why he couldn't marry the girl his father wished on him. Oh, he had no illusions he could marry a peasant girl like Izzy, but he certainly didn't want to be tied to a court-bred gossipmonger for the rest of his days. Somewhere there existed a happy medium, and he intended to find it.

His father entered the room, sent a speculative glance in Ram's direction, and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

"I will not marry the girl." Ram spoke in his most deliberate, clipped, and autocratic voice.

It was no surprise the Earl wasn't cowed in the least.

"You've no choice in the matter, son. The betrothal is a matter of law now. And we've been over this before. We need the connections marriage into the Beaumont family will bring to us." The earl crossed the darkened study to light a beeswax candle, then moved to the enormous oak sideboard, where he poured whisky into two fine Venetian glasses with a leisurely hand. His father must have indeed been up early this morn if he were already reaching for the liquor. One day Ram would ask him why he didn't bring his mistress to live closer so he wouldn't always be journeying back and forth between Bodmin. But that mystery could wait.

"'Tis reputed she's a hoyden. The last ten years of her life have been spent living amongst Charles' debauched courtiers in exile. I've no use for a courtier as my wife." An image of Izzy flashed through his mind, a woman as different from his betrothed as day was to night.

Chesworth made an exasperated sound as he handed the liquor-filled glass to Ram. "You know as well as I we must do all we can to find favor with Charles, now that he's restored to the throne." His sharp gaze grew steely. "The Beaumont family remained loyal to the monarch throughout the long years of war. Therefore, the Stuarts hold them in high favor. Yet the wars nearly bankrupted Beaumont. He's in desperate need of funds to keep his estate running, and I hold land he is anxious to recover." Taking a sip of the golden liquid, he smiled. "Our families have always gotten on well together."

"I haven't seen the girl since she was in swaddling."

"Nevertheless, marriage is the perfect solution."

"Then why don't *you* marry the girl? If her father is as desperate as you say, surely he could have no objections to marrying his precious daughter to you! You're a bloody earl, after all, and would make his daughter a countess!"

"Ramsay", his father only used his full name when he was exasperated, and even now it always made him feel like a wayward boy. "Don't be ridiculous. The girl is young enough to be my granddaughter, and while some men my age find such sport exciting, I've no desire to try keeping up with a girl in the fresh bloom of youth."

Ram opened his mouth but the Earl cut him off.

"Besides, while marriage to me would make her a countess for a time, *you* are my heir, and therefore if I did happen to sire a son on her, he would never be earl. Beaumont would never accept that."

"He would if he's as desperate as you claim. Father, you are giving up far too much! Coin, land, a title…and for what? Very little in return."

"There's nothing as valuable as the goodwill of the King and his family, and the Beaumont's have that in abundance. Things are changing quickly and 'tis obvious Charles intends to reward those who fought for him and suffered by his side in exile. You have your title and will someday be earl. But what if you have more than one son? How will the younger advance without a title and the ear of the King?"

"Money has always worked well enough in the past," Ram said, wryly.

"Not with this king." Chesworth's mouth stretched thin. "His father, Charles I, King of England by divine right, was beheaded by his own subjects, outside the Banqueting Hall he himself built. Charles may have pardoned all but a very few directly responsible for his father's murder, but don't convince yourself for a minute he's ever forgotten those who didn't try to stop what happened."

"This falls on you for siding with Parliament in the first place!" Ram dragged his fingers through his hair. "You should have stood with the king!"

"So that we might have had all our holdings taken from us and ended up in prison cells, or worse, exiled in poverty like the

Beaumonts?" His father snorted. "Son, someday you'll understand the burden of representing the people of this country. I did what I felt was in the best interest of all. Sometimes one's responsibilities prevent one from standing for a cause they believe in. I lack the luxury to be able to sacrifice myself for a greater good, not when so many depend upon me."

The earl settled heavily into a hard backed wooden chair, taking care not to spill his drink, motioning for Ram to take a seat in the matched chair. "I never approved of the regicide, and thankful I am I had nothing to do with that mess, else my head wouldn't be sitting on my neck right now. All your lands would be forfeit, handed out as rewards for those who remained loyal." He took a sip of his whisky. "Charles is a shrewd man. We are lucky enough he chose to pardon those who fought against him who were not involved with his father's execution." Shaking his head, he looked weary. "I don't enjoy kissing the arse of the man I've opposed for so many years. Yet sometimes one must do what's best for one's family, and the only way to do that is to be a loyal and faithful subject. Charles is handing out appointments left and right and it would behoove us to be aligned with one of the strongest Stuart supporters."

Ram opted to ignore the invitation to sit in favor of pacing before the hearth instead. "Father, honestly, I've no desire to become entangled in the debauchery that has ensnared the royal court since Charles was restored. I've no interest in an appointment of any sort."

His father let out a sharp chuckle. "Don't play the puritan with me, Ram. I know for a fact you've a fine mistress set up in London,

one rumored to be a very close associate of the king's mistress, Barbara Palmer."

Damn his father and his army of spies. Ram was fast running out of arguments why he shouldn't marry the Beaumont lass. There was only one more argument, and Ram wasn't yet ready to make it. He might never be.

"She's Countess Castlemaine now." He muttered the words as a stalling tactic while he struggled to find new grounds on which to protest the union.

"Who is? Barbara Palmer?" His father's face cleared and he guffawed. "Oh ho, so these days it merely takes a romp in the king's bed to be elevated to such a lofty rank?" He sobered and sighed. "I've no wish to discuss the corruption of the royal court. I'm discussing your upcoming nuptials to the Beaumont gel." He raised his hand to forestall the comment Ram was about to make. "Would you prefer I betroth Julianna to a staunch royalist to cement our relationship with the monarchy?" His father's tone, while quiet, was deadly serious.

*Bloody hell, that was a dirty tactic!* He wouldn't allow his fourteen-year-old sister to be used as a pawn in this political game, and well his father knew it. Ram would comply, if only to save his sister from a marriage match made in hell. Convention dictated that in his own marriage he could beget an heir upon his wife and then install her in a far-off country estate and live in isolation from her if he so chose. He'd *never* countenance such a marriage for his sister.

If only he could tell his father the unvarnished truth. There was no need for them to curry favor with the newly restored king. They

already held it. But he could never confess his actions, dictated by his conscience, in the last few years. His father placed loyalty above all else, and if he ever discovered what Ram had done during the interregnum, he might never forgive him. There would have to be something so objectionable about the Beaumont girl that left Ram no other option but that he break his father's heart rather than go through with the marriage. It was a last resort, only.

"I'll marry the girl. But I don't want a wife who's been sampled by every royal lapdog, and perhaps the king himself. If I find so much as a hint of impropriety, the wedding shall be called off immediately."

"I gave you my word, Ram. Should there be no virgin blood on the sheets the morning following your nuptials, we will seek an annulment. It is stipulated in the betrothal contract, which you would know if you'd taken the time to read it instead of sending your man here in your place to sign it."

Ram ignored the jibe and chose instead to concentrate on the fact that his father had placed a clause in the contract regarding the Beaumont Girl's chastity, or lack thereof. That had probably ruffled her spoiled little feathers, if she'd even bothered to read the agreement, and that amused him. "Fine." He tossed back his whisky, cursing himself for a fool for agreeing to his father's ludicrous plan in the first place. "I'll go through with this debacle if I must, but I don't want the banns read. There's still time to secure an ecclesiastical license. I don't want a big public spectacle should the marriage go forth." He thumped the empty glass on the table before him. "But I will find a reason before the wedding date as to why this girl is an

inappropriate choice for a bride. And I expect you to be the one to beg off when I do."

"I've already said as much." His father's lips quirked and his eyes twinkled with what looked suspiciously like humor. "Why don't you take a trip to London and visit that mistress of yours? It might go a long way toward curing your ill humor."

"My ill humor will remain until I extricate myself from your political machinations. But a trip to London might well be in order. It's entirely possible there might be less scheming in the royal court than here in my own home."

But nay, he was meeting Izzy at noon, and that was an appointment he fully intended to keep. Tomorrow afternoon was the absolute soonest he'd consider returning to London, and even then it would only be a quick trip to sever his ties with his current mistress, assuming Izzy agreed to become his new mistress. And assuming he could tear himself from her bed.

His father's hearty chuckles followed him as he stalked from the study, slamming the door for good measure.

# Chapter 5

A sharp knock on the bedroom door awoke Izzy the next morning. When a quick glance to her side revealed Belinda still sound asleep, Izzy pulled a wrap about her shoulders and crept to the door.

Her mother stood on the other side, eyes wide with concern. “Oh, you must have been feeling truly dreadful, darling, you look awful. I’m sorry I didn’t check in on you, Bel didn’t indicate you were seriously ill.”

Izzy muttered up a prayer of thanks for the ill effects of over imbibing. Before she could protest, her mother felt her forehead, clucking over her like a hen. “Mama, I feel ever so much better today. And I wasn’t very sick at all.”

“Perhaps you should spend another day in bed for good measure. I’ll have a maid bring you something with which to break your fast.”

“Really, Mama, that isn’t necessary. I feel right as rain. In fact I think some fresh air might do me good.”

Mama looked skeptical, but her attention was drawn toward Belinda, stirring in her bed. She heaved a big sigh. “Soon, you’ll be married and gone and I won’t be able to come find you girls like this in the morning.”

*Not any time soon, Mama.*

As the thought went through her mind, guilt nagged at her. Her mother just wanted what was best for everyone and it wasn’t her fault

she chose to support her husband in this. It was what a proper wife did. “I’ll be one property over, Mama, not across England.” She restrained herself from rolling her eyes.

Her mother stroked her hair. “I know. Still, it will not be the same as having you here, at home with me, though.”

Her mother would be so disappointed when it came to light what Izzy had done. Izzy ducked her head, overcome with guilt. But what other option did she have? She loved Paul and she would do whatever she had to do to make sure she became *his* wife.

An image of Julian rose up, so dark and virile. She pushed it down. Lust did not equate love, and she was sure part of her attraction to him was the illicitness of their acquaintance, however brief it would be.

She needed to ready herself if she was to meet him at their appointed time. With a quick kiss to her mother’s cheek and a mumble about getting dressed, she shut the door and retreated into her chamber. She found Belinda staring at her.

“Did you need something Bel?”

“You’re planning something. I’ve seen that look in your eyes enough times to know that much.”

Izzy bit her tongue to avoid sounding exasperated. “I’m *planning* to take a simple ride to clear my head. Ale leaves much to be desired.”

“Would you care for some company on your ride, then?”

Izzy struggled for calm, but obviously, Belinda’s suspicions were on high alert. The best friend in the world she might be, but she

was as tenacious as a bulldog when it came to sniffing out Izzy's schemes. More often than not, Bel would join her on whatever escapade Izzy hatched, but she'd never go along with this. One word to Belinda would find Izzy locked in this house by her parents until the wedding day. Flouncing back onto her bed, Izzy reached for her cousin's hand. "Bel, you know I appreciate your support and concern. But truly, I need some time to myself, to think things through and resign myself to my future."

Belinda snorted. "You've never *resigned* yourself to anything."

"I've little choice, have I? This wedding will proceed as planned whether I approve or not. These are my last days of freedom, and though I love you dearly, I'd like some time to myself, to adjust to it all. I must grieve the loss of Paul in my own way."

Belinda's eyes softened with sympathy and she squeezed Izzy's hand in return. "I know you love Paul, and giving him up is hard for you. Since the death of my mother you've accepted me as a true sister in your heart. If I could marry the Viscount in your place, I would, to save you this pain, but my pedigree is not lofty enough."

If Belinda could do it, she would. Izzy's throat clogged with tears at her cousin's willing sacrifice. "Piffle." She laughed off the awkward moment. "You've not the backbone to stand up to this viscount. He'll no doubt be overbearing and haughty beyond measure. You'd be no match for him with your meek acceptance. *You're* exactly the kind of woman he expects, and no roundhead deserves to get what he wants. They get what they deserve."

Belinda's eyes danced with laughter. "Meek, eh? I don't recall

being so meek when I climbed the wall with you to spy on Tyrone and his pretty barmaid. And what about that summer we dressed as lads to accompany the royal hunting party, though we'd been expressly forbidden to do so?"

Izzy laughed at the recollection. Nay, Belinda wasn't meek so much as practical, and she was the best friend anyone could ask for, standing at her side when they'd been caught, refusing to let Izzy take the full blame, and had been punished right alongside her. But Belinda had more stringent moral limits and if she knew what Izzy still planned, she'd do everything in her power to stop it. "I misspoke. You're not meek, just more accepting than I."

"'Tis why I worry for you so."

"Please don't, Bel. I'll be fine. I only need some time."

Belinda studied her closely for a moment with pursed lips, then relaxed and nodded. "Go, then. Have a pleasant ride. I'll see you when you return."

Izzy pressed a kiss to her cousin's cheek and launched out of bed, ambling to her wardrobe. What on Earth should she wear for an assignation of this sort? She didn't have another peasant outfit. Perhaps her plainest gown? But even her most ordinary gown, though worn and faded, would identify her as an aristocrat.

Her eyes lit on the breeches buried at the bottom of the wardrobe, the same ones she'd worn when she and Belinda had infiltrated that hunting party. They'd been cast-offs from her brother Eric when he'd outgrown them. She'd worn them a few times since when she'd gone riding on her own, as they were more practical for

riding than a gown.

*Would Julian be repulsed?* Well, it was better than wearing a gown that shouted her true identity to the world. And more importantly, Belinda would think nothing amiss if she wore them. Bel certainly wouldn't imagine Izzy was on her way to a clandestine meeting with a man while dressed like a boy!

She pulled the breeches on, then rummaged through the wardrobe until she found the plain linen shirt she sought, another cast-off from one of her brothers. Pulling on a pair of black riding boots, her ensemble was complete. Would Julian still be willing to make love to her the way she was dressed? She prayed so.

Going to the polished silver mirror, she brushed her hair out, plaiting it into one long, thick braid that hung down her back. How she wished she had the beautiful garland he'd bought her to wear, but it had been lost sometime during the long day. Sighing, she reached for a plain cap instead, since the one she'd worn yesterday had been lost as well. With a quick wave to Belinda, who was still abed, she sauntered out of her chamber.

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Belinda lay in bed for another ten minutes to make sure Izzy had truly gone. No matter what her cousin said, Belinda knew her better than anyone else in the world. Izzy would never sit back with calm acceptance and let her father dictate her life. Not when she thought herself in love with Paul.

*God, Paul.* Belinda shuddered at the mere thought of him. Belinda had been glad when she'd heard about the upcoming nuptials

with the viscount, not because she wanted to see Izzy unhappy, but because she saw Paul for who he truly was, which was something Izzy never had been able to do. Her cousin was blind when it came to Paul-with good reason. The man was handsome as sin, with flaxen hair and piercing blue eyes. But he was a philanderer and had pursued nearly every woman at the royal court, as well as bedded most of the wives of the men he called friends. He'd once even tried to woo *her*, during a bout of sheer boredom, and she'd given him a blistering set down, which only seemed to make him more determined. Belinda had kept those advances to herself, all the time hoping Izzy would open her eyes and see the truth about him.

When Paul left for the West Indies to sail with the great Prince Rupert, her relief had been overwhelming. But she'd vowed if he returned for Izzy as he'd promised Belinda would break her silence and tell her cousin the truth.

Now she wouldn't have to be the bearer of bad news. A selfish thought, aye, but one that brought great relief because not for one moment would she ever wish pain on her best friend. It troubled her that Izzy's father had arranged a marriage against her will, but she also knew he was a fair man who loved his only daughter fiercely. He would never make a bad decision where Izzy was concerned, and if he had faith in this viscount, then so would Belinda. And Izzy would someday as well, once she resigned herself to her fate. Her cousin did all things with great gusto, and once this marriage was a fait acompli, she would throw herself into the role of wife and viscountess and eventual mother, as if she'd always wanted it.

When enough time had passed and Belinda knew Izzy had truly gone, she slid from the bed and retreated to her own chamber where she hurried to dress. She had recognized the look in her cousin's eyes. Izzy was up to something likely to land her in a heap of trouble, something she particularly excelled at. It would be best to follow at a distance and keep a discreet eye on her.

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Ram paced back and forth before the riverbank, anxiously awaiting Izzy's arrival. Would she come? Aside from the brief disagreement with his father earlier, he'd thought of little else since he'd watched her walk away when he'd left her the night before. Just the thought of seeing her again lifted his flagging spirits almost the moment he'd stalked from his father's study.

He hoped she didn't feel poorly this morning from all the ale she'd consumed. Because even if she did, he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep his hands to himself. Should he whisk her off to Wadebridge and let a room at an inn for the day, or lay the blanket he'd brought with him on the ground right there beside the river?

God, what was wrong with him? He ran his fingers through his hair. This was ridiculous. He was supposed to be in Cornwall spying on his soon-to-be-bride, or even better, ferreting out any reason why she wouldn't make a good bride. Yet he couldn't take his thoughts off his mystery maiden long enough to concentrate on his betrothed.

Mercury nickered and Ram whirled about, knowing the sound heralded her arrival. His breath caught, and he almost choked. *Izzy?* Was she wearing *breeches?* He watched the vision before him as it

grew nearer, breathing harder the closer she came. Those pert lips that haunted his dreams all evening long were quirked in a grin and wisps of chestnut curls escaped her loose braid. There was no denying it was Izzy; she was indeed dressed in breeches and a plain, billowy white shirt, but that garment couldn't conceal the high curves of her breasts or the gentle flare of her hips. Dear God, she was of short stature, but the snug doeskin breeches encased legs that seemed to go on forever. His attention focused on the juncture of her thighs, visible though her shirt, which hung only to her hips. He swallowed hard.

Then he found himself frowning at her hair, braided and tucked under a cap. That wouldn't do at all. She needed that glorious chestnut hair spilling all about her shoulders and down her back as she'd had it yesterday. He'd remedy that straight away.

He strode towards her with purpose, intending a greeting, but it died on his lips when he saw the hunger in her eyes. Instead, as soon as she was within reach he grasped her shoulders and hauled her against him, swooping down to capture her mouth with his. He tore the cap from her head and shook out the braid, letting her hair flow around them. Then he slipped his hands beneath the shirt and found her bare breasts. She gasped in pleasure, straining against him as if trying to get closer as he cupped them in his palms, feeling their weight in his hands. She was perfection. Yet hadn't he known she would be?

Her hands clutched at his back, then slid around to his front to explore the planes of his chest as though she'd never before touched a man. He loved that he excited her as much as she did him. He tore his

mouth from hers, gasping heavily. The riverbank it would be. “Wait here.”

She stood with glazed eyes as he turned to Mercury and grabbed the blanket draped over the horse’s rump, then shook it out, laying it upon the ground.

He knelt on the blanket and reached out a hand. She stepped to his side and took it without hesitation. He lowered her down to the ground, rolling his body over hers. Finally, he was where he most desired to be.

He studied her face in the light of day, obsessed with her all over again. She had the most adorable nose. Small, with a slight tip up at the end, it was irresistible. He feathered kisses over it before moving on to her cheeks, her forehead, and finally her lips. When their mouths met, it was like flame set to kindling. They exploded all over again, her mouth opening to accept his eagerly seeking tongue.

He wasted no time now. His hands lowered to the hem of her shirt, tugging upwards, lifting it slowly over her head, baring her to his gaze. He froze at the loveliness revealed before him. Her breasts were divine. Pale and uplifted, her nipples a dusty rose color, he watched in fascination as they came to attention only from the force of his stare. God, if she was so responsive to just a look, what would her response be when he buried his tongue between her legs?

He’d soon find out.

Reverently he bent his head and touched his tongue to one peak, reveling in her gasp and the way her body surged upwards. He laved her, using his teeth to gently scrape, then his tongue to circle

round and round the taut peak and finally pulling the whole of her nipple into his mouth to suckle. He cupped her other breast, flicking the sensitized tip with his thumb.

Her soft cries of pleasure were an aphrodisiac, building his excitement to new heights. But before he gave into his desires he wanted to worship the temple of her body in all its glory.

As his mouth returned to find hers, his fingers moved with deft swiftness to the fastenings of her breeches. He nibbled at her lips as he unfastened them and received no protest. Taking that as a good sign, he slid them down her hips. Excitement leapt in his veins as he discovered she wore nothing beneath. His cock strained against his own breeches, begging to be freed, but he gritted his teeth, holding himself in check. There'd be plenty of time for his pleasure, later.

Drifting his hand over her flat belly, he drew light circles around her navel with his fingers, delighting in the soft gasps escaping her lips. Finally, he allowed himself the luxury of running his fingers through the damp curls between her legs. The touch ignited her. She bit down on his lip and he growled, pressing her head back with the force of his kiss as he ground his palm against the juncture of her thighs. The cry that escaped her lips was so primal, urging him on.

Suddenly her hands were everywhere. She laced her fingers through his hair, tugging almost painfully, sliding them down his front and under his shirt. She pushed it up as she explored his body. He almost lost control when she flicked her fingernail against his nipple.

*Little hellcat!* He'd be the one to control this encounter, her pleasure. There'd be time enough for her to take control another time,

now was about his domination of *her*. He slid his hands up her arms, bringing both of her wrists together above her head, pinning them there in one of his hands. She twisted against the captivity but went still when he returned his free hand between her legs. She arched upwards as his finger stroked her slick folds, coating his finger in dewy moisture as he explored her flesh with leisure. She was so hot, so wet, and his shaft jumped, longing to take the place of his finger.

When his seeking fingers found her swollen nub she went still beneath him. He teased without mercy, pulling back from her mouth to watch her face as he traced the delicate spot, applying more and more pressure as he sped his movements, learning exactly which caresses drove her wild. Her eyes shut and her mouth parted. Her breathing became shallow and unsteady. She was reaching the precipice, ready to go over the edge with the smallest nudge.

Without stopping the circular movement, he slid his middle finger into her tight sheath and she exploded around him, crying out so loudly that birds flew from the trees. Her head thrashed from side to side as her body pulsed around him. The sheer beauty of her climax mesmerized him. The look of awe in her eyes was like that of a woman experiencing release for the first time, and he swelled with pride and gladness to be the one who'd pleasured her so. He had given her that. Her body continued to weep around his fingers as he softened his strokes until her convulsing slowed, then finally stopped.

Releasing her hands from above her head, he pressed a kiss to her lips. She was magnificent. The moment she recovered her breath, he would slide inside her beautiful, welcoming body, and bring her an

even more intense release.

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Awe filled Izzy. Never in all her imaginings had she ever thought being made love to could feel so incredible. Her body was sated and languid; she couldn't have lifted a limb if her life depended on it. And they'd only just begun!

Julian smiled down at her with such tenderness, his grey eyes soft, and something in her heart turned over, hard. The languorousness faded and she reached for him, sliding her arms around his neck, luxuriating in the feel of his raven hair between her fingers before pulling his head down so she could meld her mouth to his in wordless appreciation. His kiss was hot, possessive, and need flared between them all over again. He covered her with his body, supporting his weight with his arms, and she wrapped her arms around his back, feeling the muscles jump beneath her seeking hands. His hardness pressed against the juncture of her thighs, the only barrier between them the breeches he still wore.

Just as she gathered the courage to reach down and release him from the bondage of his garment, a thrashing came from the trees, along with the faint cry of "Izzy!"

*That sounds like Belinda!*

She gasped and struggled beneath Julian to extricate herself from his embrace, whispering, "I must dress. 'Tis my cousin!"

A sound of frustration escaped him, but he leapt from her, grabbing her hand and lifting her to her feet. As she yanked her breeches up to her waist and fastened them, Julian snatched her white

shirt from the ground and brought it over her head. She slid her arms into the sleeves. It settled around her waist just as Belinda came into view, riding her dappled mare.

Bel drew the horse to a halt upon spotting them, her eyes widening in surprise and horror. But soon enough, she recovered her power of speech.

"Izzy Beaumont, *what* do you think you're doing?"

# Chapter 6

Ram stiffened. *Beaumont?* The new arrival advanced on them, and Izzy widened the gap between herself and him. As if even fully clothed, there was any doubt as to what they'd been doing, with her hair in disarray and a blanket laid on the ground.

She gave him a tremulous smile, whispering, "I must go, I'm so sorry." He managed a curt nod, unable to speak over the tumultuous thoughts churning in his mind.

"Meet me on the morrow?" She asked under her breath, mirroring his words of the night before.

He nodded again and she sprinted from his side, leading the girl on the horse away from him. As they disappeared from sight he clenched his fists at his side.

*Beaumont!*

Izzy…most certainly was a nickname for Isabelle. Why hadn't he realized that before? Because in his own mind he'd referred to his betrothed only as the Beaumont girl, never by her actual name. His mystery maiden was Isabelle Beaumont, his betrothed! Hadn't he known from her speech and her mannerisms she was no peasant? How could he have not made the connection earlier?

Because he'd been thinking with his cock, instead of his brain.

Izzy was Isabelle Beaumont; the woman he already adored was to become his *wife* in only a matter of *weeks*.

His heart leapt with the knowledge she was the one. His father

was right, the rumors all true. She was a great beauty. Someday she'd be a magnificent Countess.

And then the malicious truth came hard on the heels of euphoria. His betrothed was gallivanting about the countryside, dressing like a peasant and in those bloody breeches, intending to bed a perfect stranger, with nary a thought to the wedding contract she'd signed. She had no idea he was Ramsay Maitland, not Julian James. Yet she'd been moments away from giving her body to a virtual stranger.

Cold rage washed over him with such force he began to shake. She meant to cuckold him even before they were wed! She'd played him for a fool!

The nearest solid object to him was a stout tree, and he smashed his fist against it, reveling in the pain the blow brought. He should have known something like this would happen, for weren't most highborn women hussies to their core, just like his mother?

And now he was betrothed to one no different than his dam. Nay, he would *not* end up like his father, pretending ignorance as his wife's belly grew round with the fruit planted by another man's seed. And if his mother and the child had survived the birth, his father would have claimed the child as his own, rather than risk scandal and dishonor. Ram would be *damned* before he allowed that to happen!

'Twas the real reason behind his father's distaste for the royal court and the lifestyle that accompanied it. The lax morals at St. James's had been his wife's downfall. The Earl had never been a true Parliamentarian or Puritan; he'd only been disgusted by the

immorality and excess amongst the court of the first King Charles. Ram was no Puritan; he liked immorality and excess as much as the next man, often he engaged in both with the next man's wife; but his own wife would be pure and demure. If that made him a hypocrite, it was too bloody bad.

Isabelle Beaumont wasn't pure or demure. She was a slut. Marriage to her was impossible now. He had the proof he'd come for, even if he'd found it in a rather unexpected manner. Now he had the proof he'd sought, and once he'd explained all that transpired these past two days to his father, the earl would have to beg off the marriage, as promised. To the devil with the good dealings between the two families.

He mounted Mercury and let the horse have his head, knowing he'd make his way back to the manor eventually. His thoughts churned too madly to pay attention to anything more than his wrath.

How ironic, he'd spent the whole of yesterday comparing the peasant Izzy with his betrothed and finding his betrothed wanting, and they were one and the same. Except Isabelle Beaumont was still wanting, now that he knew the truth. An aristocratic maiden did *not* sneak off in disguise to enjoy the revelries of the lower classes, nor allow herself to be seduced by a stranger, nor quaff ale. And while he recognized the double-standard, since he had done as much himself, it did not ease his anger, for the rules were different where men and women were concerned. A noblewoman didn't don breeches to go riding, for Christ's sake, no matter that he'd found it arousing when Izzy was still a mystery maiden. And a soon-to-be viscountess under

no circumstances allowed any man but her betrothed to lay her down on a blanket by a river. It was no matter he *was* her betrothed, for she hadn't known it.

Sudden suspicion snaked through him. Perhaps it was far too great a coincidence that the woman he'd "accidentally" met on his way to Padstow was in fact his betrothed. What if Izzy did know his identity? What if she planned to seduce him, to force their marriage no matter what he discovered about her?

Either way, one thing was clear as daylight. He could never have her now. The thought struck him like a punch to the gut. For if he did take her to bed, surely she'd claim it was he who took the virginity she'd most likely given away long ago, and he'd be compelled to go through with the wedding. He'd not be tied to a cheating harlot for the rest of his days! Thank God her cousin had come searching for her.

Anxious to confront his father, return to London and reclaim his bachelor status, he set his heels to Mercury's side.

And lamented he'd never know the heaven of release within Isabelle Beaumont's magnificent body.

***

Belinda didn't speak until they were back at the house, in Izzy's chamber. As soon as the door closed, Belinda whirled on her.

"You lied to me! You blatantly lied! How could you?"

Izzy squeezed her eyes shut. There had to be some way to make Belinda see, to express how far she'd go to have the life with Paul that he'd promised. She sat on her bed and stared at her cousin, praying

she could make her understand.

"I *hate* lying to you, Bel, but I had no choice! I feared you'd go to my father if you knew what I planned."

"No other choice? You had no other choice than to offer yourself to the first man you could find and let him tumble you in the grass?"

Izzy cringed at her crude choice of language, but of course that's how Belinda saw it. That's exactly what Izzy had been doing with Julian when Belinda found them.

But Belinda was so wrong. He wasn't just any man. He was Julian. Kind, sensitive, exciting, tempting, handsome Julian. Nay, he was not just *any* man.

"Did you give your virginity to that man? Were you with him yesterday as well? What will you tell your father?" The questions were fired so quickly, Izzy didn't know which to answer first.

"Bel, I can't give Paul up. I love him. I know you don't understand because you've never been in love, but I will do *anything* to make a life with him." She raised her hand to stop Belinda's protest. "I cannot change the way I feel. I'm sorry. I know I've disappointed you." Tears burned in her eyes. It devastated her to think Belinda now thought less of her.

Belinda sighed deeply and sat beside Izzy on the bed, stroking her hair. "I know you love Paul. I know you hate the idea of marriage to a stranger. But some things just aren't done. And giving your virtue to a random stranger is one of those things."

"But what else am I to do?" Izzy heard the break in her own

voice and hated that proof of her weakness.

Belinda pressed her forehead to Izzy's, an act of both solidarity and love. "We are only women, living at the whim of men. You and I are lucky to have been granted such freedom by your father thus far, more freedom than most women experience in a lifetime. But your father needs you to do this for him now, Izzy. How can you be so selfish and not think of him, after all he has done for you?"

Now Izzy did cry, tears pouring unimpeded down her cheeks. "I don't wish to be selfish, Bel," she whispered on a broken sob. "But the thought of giving Paul up hurts me so. How could Papa ask this of me, when he knows how much I love Paul? 'Tis as if my feelings matter naught to him at all. Do you know he threatened to disown me if I refused to agree to the wedding?" She remembered the pain his words had invoked, and her voice dropped to a whisper "After he'd taken the switch to me."

"He was frustrated, Izzy. He would not have disowned you. He loves you far too much to ever do so."

"But he doesn't respect my feelings for Paul."

"What if Paul doesn't come back, Izzy?"

An image of Julian conjured in Izzy's mind. But that way lay lunacy; Julian was not for her. She'd lose her family for certain if she ran off and married a man like Julian. Besides, she'd known him all of two days and a strong attraction to a man didn't mean love. Love was what she shared with Paul.

"Paul isn't the man for you, and your father knows it. I never wanted to have to tell you this, but Paul will only break your heart,

Izzy. He's a notorious libertine. Even if he does come for you he'll never be true to you."

Anger sizzled through Izzy- Belinda had gone too far. Even though sometimes, in the middle of the night, Izzy despaired that Paul would ever come for her, she'd not allow anyone, not even Belinda, to spread malicious rumors about him.

Her tears dried in an instant. "How dare you say something so cruel? Do you think you'll convince me he's unworthy so I'll abandon my plans to evade this marriage? Because I warn you now, it won't work! I'll never believe such malicious gossip and can't believe you would spread such an evil rumor!"

Belinda removed her soothing touch and stood from the bed, whipping about to face her. "Nay, Izzy." Her voice was ice. "We are the best of friends. *I* would never lie to you, not even about something that would hurt you so much."

"If you aren't lying, then you've been misled."

"I never wanted to have to tell you this." Bel took a deep breath "Paul made an advance toward me, not long before he left, and *after* he'd declared himself to you."

Pain knifed through Izzy at the words. "'Tis not true," she cried. "He wouldn't do such a thing." Words tumbled from her lips without thought. "You get so little attention from gentlemen, Bel. Paul was clearly only being kind and surely you misconstrued his intentions."

Belinda gasped.

Too late, Izzy regretted the harsh words as her cousin's face paled.

“I may not get as much attention as you from the gentlemen, Izzy, that’s true. But I know the difference between polite conversation and flirting that crosses a line.” Belinda’s voice was low, wavering. “You may choose to believe me or not, but I stand by my words. And I’ll try to remember you are hurting right now and speak out of pain, not a desire to be cruel.”

When Izzy saw Belinda’s lips trembling, she launched herself from the bed and threw her arms around her cousin, holding her tight. “I’m so sorry Belinda,” she gasped, “please don’t hate me. I’m so confused about everything. I don’t know what to do!”

For a moment Belinda made no response, and Izzy was terrified she’d pushed away the most important person in her life, her dearest friend and closest ally. But Belinda’s arms slowly embraced her back, the touch of her hands soft against Izzy’s hair. “It’s all right, Izzy. Everything will untangle itself, somehow. You’ll see.”

Izzy pulled back to look into Belinda’s face, and almost collapsed in relief at the renewed affection in her cousin’s eyes.

“I’ll not resign myself to this wedding, Bel. But I promise I will not lie to you again,” she exclaimed with vehemence.

Belinda sighed. “I suppose that’s the most I can hope for.” Resignation was clear in her voice. “So tell me about the gentleman from the woods. What’s his name? Has he been gentle with you, at least?”

“Oh Bel, he is so very kind and gentle. His name is Julian James. I met him on the way to Wadebridge. He rescued my cap from the river. It was all very chivalrous and romantic.”

Belinda stiffened, her face clouding over. “Julian James?”

Izzy frowned. “Aye. Do you know of him?”

Belinda’s face cleared and she shook her head. “Nay, I’m not familiar with anyone who goes by that name.”

“Well, we had the most wonderful time at the May Day festivities!”

And she told Belinda everything, leaving nothing out. She’d learned her lesson and she wouldn’t lie to her cousin again!

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Frustration gnawed at Ram as he paced aimlessly across his father’s study. ‘Twas just his luck his sire chose this day to go to Bodmin, again. It would be hours ere he returned home, if he returned home that night at all.

Ram’s humor had not improved since his discovery of Izzy’s identity. His body remained in a state of painful arousal, which infuriated him all the more, because he didn’t want to lust for the little hussy. A trip to the village and a visit with a tavern wench would release his frustration. Did Maura still service the men of the village after all these years? He instantly rejected the idea. A dirty, worn serving woman could never compare to the sweet and tempting delights promised him by Izzy’s kisses and her touch. He’d find only physical release with Maura or any other woman of her ilk, but he’d never be sated.

Blast the wench! He was close to seeing to his own need in the privacy of his chamber, something he hadn’t been reduced to in ages.

He did battle in his own mind as well, for he knew she’d be

awaiting him by the riverbank tomorrow at noon, as she'd promised. If it was a fuck she was after, his body was willing and able to oblige.

But he couldn't forget, for even one moment, who and what she was. If he fell into that particular trap he'd be ensnared for the rest of his life. He'd keep his cock in his breeches where it belonged and to the devil with Izzy Beaumont.

Just as he was tossing back his whisky, Hawthorne coughed discreetly from the open door to the study. Ram turned an evil glare on the man for disturbing his seething. Hawthorne ignored the look as only a servant who'd been with them since Ram was a lad could do. He never really was cowed by Ram's aristocratic glares.

Ram sighed. "Aye, Hawthorne?"

"You have a caller, my lord."

"Well, send whoever it is away. I'm not fit company for my horse at the moment."

Hawthorne coughed again. "Sir? 'Tis a woman, a lady, and she's here *alone*." The last word was whispered.

Ram's eyebrows rose into his hairline. It was inappropriate for any woman to visit a gentleman unaccompanied, let alone a lady. There was only one lady of his recent acquaintance he knew for sure didn't care about the rules of propriety.

Could it be Izzy? Did she know who he really was?

His heart leapt, but he forced the rush of happiness down with ruthlessness. It didn't matter if it was Izzy, he was done with her. He'd not be marrying her, nor carrying on with her in any other way.

But curiosity got the better of him. "Show her in, Hawthorne."

As he waited he straightened his clothing and ran a hand through his hair. And hoped the whisky hadn't made his eyes too red rimmed. When Hawthorne appeared at the door, it wasn't Izzy he presented. Ram's heart sank, much to his dismay.

It was the woman who'd found him with Izzy in the woods earlier in the day. She was of medium height with dark blonde hair, but there was no mistaking the delicate tilt of her nose. She was without a doubt a relation of Izzy's. Her cousin, wasn't that what Izzy had hissed to him?

"What can I do for you, Miss…?"

"Spencer. Miss Belinda Spencer."

"Well, Miss Spencer, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

She clasped her hands together in a gesture that bespoke nervousness. "I realize this is rather inappropriate, but I had to see you and find out if my suspicions were correct." She met his gaze directly. "I see they were."

He folded his arms across his chest, waiting for her to continue.

"Izzy is my cousin." She seemed to wait for some reaction to her words, but Ram only stared. He was in a piss-poor mood and wouldn't make this easy for her, especially since he'd already figured out who she was.

With a deep sigh, she continued. "I spoke with Izzy this morning. And when she told me your name was Julian James, I found it highly coincidental the name she called you by happened to be the middle names of Ramsay Maitland, her betrothed. It crossed my mind

you might be keeping your identity from her, so I came to see for myself."

Ram started. He'd kept his identity secret from *her?* It was without a doubt the other way around. "Miss Spencer, I had no idea who Izzy was until you called her by her full name. Until that moment I never dreamed she was in fact my betrothed."

"Then, what were you doing with her?" Her brow furrowed.

He stared, wondering how blunt to be. Unfolding his arms from his chest, he took a step forward. "I came upon her on my way to the May Day festivities. She was dressed as a peasant wench and quite comely. I sought only an afternoon of pleasant entertainment, nothing more."

He should have felt shame as he watched Miss Spencer's cheeks turn pink, but instead took perverse pleasure in it. His fury with Izzy extended to all those associated with her. "Let me ask you, Miss Spencer. Does Izzy know who I really am?"

He held his breath, hoping she would answer in the affirmative, for it might make everything different if Izzy had been playing a game, dabbling with a man she knew would be her husband in a matter of weeks. He didn't care for women's ruses, and it would rankle to know she'd played him for her amusement, but it would make what she'd done forgivable at least.

Miss Spencer shook her head, dashing his hopes.

He straightened himself to his full height. "Miss Spencer, I don't mean to take my anger out on you. But the wedding will be called off as soon as my father returns. I cannot possibly marry a woman who

carries on as your cousin has done these two days past."

He'd thought Izzy's cousin a shy and mousy girl, but she puffed up in outrage at his comment. "I notice it hardly factors in that you were carrying on with a woman you didn't know to be your betrothed either."

"Touché, Miss Spencer. But you and I know it's a very different world for women and men. I don't run the risk of quickening with a stranger's child, do I?"

Miss Spencer crossed her arms over her chest. "Izzy runs no risk of bringing another man's child to your wedding bed. She's a virgin."

Ram snorted. "The woman who rolled in the grass with me today is no virgin."

Her jaw dropped.

He'd shocked her. Gentlemen didn't speak to ladies in such a manner. It was almost amusing to watch prim Miss Spencer try to recover her composure. But recover it she did and she went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"Izzy is very much against this marriage. She feels trapped. And after reading the marriage contract she concluded the only way to avoid the marriage was to give her virtue away to the first man who would take it- which, by the greatest of coincidences, happened to be *you*."

He blinked. *That was her brilliant idea?*

That a woman might go to such extremes to avoid marriage shocked Ram, nor was he quite convinced of it. It wasn't that he had an overblown opinion of his own worth, but he knew what women

wanted from marriage and he *would* be an earl someday, after all. A very rich earl.

Miss Spencer paced back and forth, oblivious to the doubts she'd stirred up. "It is *almost* humorous. But unless *you* have taken it, her virginity is still very much intact."

He tried to ignore the hope creeping over him at her words. If 'twas true and Izzy really was a virgin, the wedding could go forth as planned. Except…Miss Spencer's words pricked his pride.

"Why is she so set against marriage to me?"

Miss Spencer stared at him for a few moments, obviously contemplating what to reveal. "Where should I begin?"

He started, then laughed. "Am I so bad, then?"

Miss Spencer grimaced. "What I tell you stays between the two of us?"

Ram nodded.

"First of all, Izzy is fiercely loyal to the King and the idea of marrying into a Parliamentarian family doesn't appeal to her. Secondly, her father always made it clear the choice of husband would be hers alone to make. And the biggest obstacle to your marriage is that Izzy fancies herself in love with another man. She's sworn to wait for him to come back for her as he promised."

He could understand the first two points Miss Spencer raised, though the idea of an aristocratic woman choosing her own husband was nearly unheard of. But as he absorbed the third point raised by Miss Spencer, a foreign emotion overcame him. Jealousy. The very thought of the woman he'd held in his arms that morning loving

another man was enough to make him want to marry her and treat her so well, enslave her with passion and love, she'd forget any other man even existed but him.

"Who is the man she thinks she loves?"

"My lord, I don't see how that matters."

"It matters."

Miss Spencer sighed. "Sir Paul Huntley."

"Huntley? Good God, you can't be serious. The man is a peacock and a philandering libertine to boot!"

"I know." Miss Spencer's voice was very soft, and Ram began to understand.

"You are against this relationship with Huntley?"

She nodded. "He'll only hurt her."

"So you support her marriage to me?" He narrowed his eyes, awaiting her response.

"My lord, I don't know you. I only know I trust Izzy's father, as he's been like a father to me most of my life. He would never do anything to harm her, and if he has chosen you, then I support that decision. But even more importantly, I spoke of you with Izzy this morn and it was quite clear she genuinely likes you, despite her feelings for Paul, and that gives me tremendous hope."

Ram was dumfounded at both her trust in her uncle and loyalty to her cousin. In his experience, trust and loyalty were absent in most women. That she had both characteristics made the woman before him his closest ally, if he wanted one, for she was the person who knew Izzy best and could therefore be an incredible asset in bringing

his errant betrothed to heel. His poor mood began slipping away.

"You've come here to ask me to not beg off from the marriage?" Was he really considering going through with this? He had come to Cornwall to find a way to avoid a wedding at all costs, yet now the thought of marriage…wasn't so dreadful.

"Aye, I have."

"Have you any advice that might help me in my pursuit of your cousin?"

Miss Spencer chewed her lip for a moment, much in the same way Izzy did.

"There are two things I can think to tell you. First of all, Izzy knows she is beautiful-"

Ram snorted. "Of course she knows that."

"You didn't let me finish, my lord. Izzy knows she's beautiful, but she accepts it just as she accepts her eyes are blue. So waxing poetic about her beauty is not likely to win her heart. She'd rather be loved for who she is, rather than for the way she looks."

Ram nodded. "And the second thing?"

Miss Spencer's lips pursed. "Izzy is very loyal. Once someone wins Izzy's love and friendship, there is nothing she won't do for that person. So do not disparage anyone Izzy loves; not the King, not her family, nor Huntley. Especially not Huntley. She'll not forgive a slight against someone important to her."

Izzy's regard for Huntley was irritating, yet if she was as loyal as her cousin claimed, that would be no bad thing. He only needed to show her why he'd be a better choice for marriage that Sir Paul

Huntley.

Miss Spencer's hands clutched together again, as though there was something else she wanted to say that discomfited her. He respected the courage she'd displayed thus far, so he belatedly attempted civility. "Is there something else you would ask of me?"

Once again, Miss Spencer blushed a becoming pink color. "I ask you to spare Izzy's virginity until the wedding night. If she thinks she has *any* reason to call the wedding off, she'll go to her father and tell him bluntly of what she's done. And as there will be no blood on the sheets…well, you understand what I'm saying."

He nodded, wanting to put her mind at ease now that she was a collaborator. "I'll string her along until the wedding. I can't say she'll be happy when she discovers the deception, but as there will be no other reason to call the wedding off, she'll be forced to go along with it."

Relief crossed Miss Spencer's face and she smiled, a grin that lit up her entire face, turning her from plain into pretty.

"You have my gratitude, my lord."

"And you have my thanks for bringing me these tidings."

She nodded. "I must go. It's inappropriate for me to be here, and I wouldn't want word to get back to Izzy."

He took her hand, placing a kiss on the back of it. "Return to your cousin. I'll take care of everything else."

# Chapter 7

Stomach clenching with anxiety, Izzy waited at the riverbank, dressed in the same clothing as the day before. Would Julian show for their rendezvous? Not only did she need him to help escape the bonds of matrimony, she'd missed him.

She couldn't stop thinking of the things he'd done to her yesterday! Her breathing grew strained as she recalled the way her body shattered when he'd pleasured her so completely. She was ready for a repeat performance, and so much more.

So it was with great relief when she heard the sound of a horse nickering and knew she would see Mercury and his master appear any moment. Her pulse raced faster. Horse and rider crested a hill and she smiled, waving.

Instead of dismounting as she expected, Julian pulled the horse to her side and held out his hand. Without a second thought she put her hand in his and let him hoist her into the saddle before him. As in the first time they'd ridden together, it was a tight fit, but she felt no discomfiture this time pressed so intimately against his solid body.

"Where do we go?" she gasped in excitement.

Before answering, Julian put one hand under her chin, tipping her head back to claim her lips for a scorching kiss. Every muscle in her body turned to jelly as she melted against him.

He pulled back with a look of such desire in his eyes, her heart leapt

“Hullo.”

His eyes were a stormy grey, his dark skin setting off the white of his teeth as he smiled at her.

“Good morn,” she breathed back.

He grinned, tightening his arms about her, and she turned back around as the horse continued on.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Trust you not to debauch me in the most evil of ways? Absolutely not!”

She giggled at the look on his face, but he responded with a simple, “Smart girl.”

“I mean it, Julian!” She tugged on his sleeve. “Where are we going?”

“To a place with more privacy than the river bank. ‘Twill make the debauchery that much easier and far more delicious.” She looked back in time to see him waggle his eyebrows suggestively.

Her heart began to pound and unfamiliar moisture pooled between her legs. *So this was desire!* She couldn’t believe she could be so wanton.

She frowned. Paul had never inspired this kind of desire in her. Did that mean something? Her inner voice argued that Paul was simply too much of a gentleman to take such liberties with her, and Julian was brazen. It was that, and the illicitness of the affair that excited her. It must be so.

They traveled in a companionable silence away from the river

until a small, ramshackle round stone hut came into view. The thatch on the roof needed replacing, but it appeared a stable enough building. It looked long abandoned. As Julian tied Mercury to a tree and left him to graze, then led her inside, she could see someone, probably Julian himself, had been there recently and readied it for their arrival. There were fresh logs in the hearth and a flagon of wine and two pewter goblets had been set upon a wooden table. Izzy's glance immediately went to the small pallet against the back wall. It was obvious the ticking had recently been replaced and clean white sheets adorned it.

She swallowed hard.

Julian motioned about the hut with a hand. "Does this please you? I thought it might be best to stay indoors, where people can't surprise us as your cousin did, yesterday."

"You did all this for me?"

"Well, not all for you. I have plans of my own, you see." He waggled those raven brows again. She couldn't keep from laughing.

"This is perfect, Julian. Truly."

"Good." His voice had turned silky. What she was beginning to call the "I'm about to kiss you look" crossed his face.

He stepped to her side and cradled her cheek with his hand, lifting her mouth to his. As before, as soon as their mouths fused, a conflagration exploded between them, like a spark set to gunpowder. Helpless to resist, he swept her off to that heavenly place his kisses took her. Her nipples went taut as she pressed herself against him with a gasp.

Julian bent and lifted her into his arms, carrying her to the pallet, where he gently laid her upon it. Her pulse slammed in her veins with both excitement and fear of the unknown. He would take her virginity on this pallet.

His hands were everywhere at once, in her hair, cradling her face, sliding down her body. He divested her of the linen shirt and bent his head to her breasts, worshipping them the way he'd done yesterday.

She slipped her hands under his linen shirt, wanting to see all of him, taste him, as he tasted her. His hands joined hers to facilitate the removal of the garment and then he lay next to her, bronzed and magnificent. A shudder escaped as she inspected the hard planes of his chest, his wonderfully wide shoulders, the ridged muscles of his belly leading down to the waistband of his breeches. With one fingertip she traced the dips and ridges before her, running it across his shoulder and down his arm, then across his stomach and back up to his pectoral. His muscles jumped beneath her light touch and his breathing grew heavy but he held still and allowed her to explore.

Curiosity to discover what lay beneath his breeches gnawed at her, but she wasn't quite brave enough yet to reach so boldly for him. Instead, she leaned over and flicked her tongue against his nipple, surprised when he sucked in his breath, hard. It delighted her that he liked that as much as she liked when he did it to her.

Her hands slid up his chest, over his strong shoulders, reveling in the feel of his warm flesh and the dark hairs on his forearms that tickled her hands on their journey. She wrapped her arms around to

his back, feeling the muscles there flexing in response to her touch, and tugged at him, pulling him over her so she could kiss him again.

It was as if he'd been holding himself back during her exploration, because the moment their mouths met again, he took control. Cupping her breasts, he rolled her nipples between his fingers as his tongue forced its way deeper into her mouth.

Then his hands floated downward and she knew he was about to remove her breeches. For an instant she stiffened, the reality of the situation crashing upon her along with the magnitude of the moment, and the choice she'd made to do this insane thing. Except, remembering his gentle touch of yesterday, her anxiety dissolved and she gave herself over to his worshipping hands.

After removing her boots, he peeled the breeches down her legs in an agonizingly slow manner, almost as if he were taking his time unwrapping a much anticipated gift. As the cool air in the hut blew over her, emphasizing the wetness between her legs, shyness struck her and she couldn't meet his eyes and stared at his full lips instead. But when he removed the breeches he gazed down at her nude body with such reverence and desire, the shyness faded and she reveled in her nakedness, suddenly emboldened and alive. Powerful. Heat burned in his eyes and she wanted, nay needed, every part of his body pressed against hers. She put her arms out, beckoning him to her, and he returned to capture her lips.

Then his mouth was gone, slowly making its way around to her ear, where he used the tip of his tongue to lick circles around her sensitive flesh before drawing her earlobe into his mouth and

suckling. She arched beneath him at the contact. *Who knew earlobes could be so sensitive?*

His lips continued their path, nibbling at the pulsing vein in her throat, before laving kisses in the hollow at the base of her neck. As he drew nearer to her breasts, her anticipation grew so great she couldn't contain a low moan of need. He chuckled against her skin. Oh, he knew what she wanted, but he meant to tease. Someday soon, she'd pay him back in kind for this sweet torment.

And then he drew the crest of her breast into his mouth and all thought of vengeance fled, replaced only with sensation. Desire traveled down her body directly to that spot between her thighs where heavy moisture leaked anew. His touch left her hot and shivery at the same time.

His hands wrapped around her waist, spanning her front and slowly moving down, his mouth following in their path. When he combed through the curls between her legs, Izzy arched her hips upward, needing his touch so desperately. Her head thrashed on the pillow and she cried his name, urging his hands to move faster, to quench her burning desire faster, even as she wondered if such a desperate need could ever be satisfied.

He didn't heed her demands. Instead, his hands slid to the inside of her thighs, pushing them apart. She resisted for only a single instant before she surrendered, feeling more vulnerable than ever before in her life. His thumbs crept closer to the place that ached. Her breath hitched with anticipation as she wondered if he would ever touch her where she needed it most.

“Julian, please,” she panted.

He laughed low, a wicked sound that caused a strange flutter in her belly. “Relax, love. I intend to give you everything you need.”

He applied pressure with each thumb between her inner thighs and the swollen flesh between her legs. She moaned with delight. If he didn’t touch her where she most needed it, and soon, she would die.

And then, soft and light, like a gentle breeze in the summer, his breath feathered against her heated skin. She tore her head off the pillow to stare down at him, but at that instant he leaned in, using his tongue in one long slow motion to lick the entire length of her folds.

She gasped and fell back against the pillow, head spinning as this new sensation bombarded her with pleasure even as shock coursed through her at the intimate thing he was doing. Julian slid his hands beneath her buttocks, lifting her, and set to work pleasuring her with his tongue and lips.

She moaned as his tongue slid like fire against her wet flesh in wide, long strokes. The tip delved into her folds until he found that magical spot he’d awakened in her yesterday, laving it with his tongue.

She arched against his mouth, gasping, hands clawing at the sheets beneath her from the sheer pleasure of what he was doing.

Using his lips, he drew the small nub into his mouth and suckled, and she was lost. A crescendo began to build in her body as each breath became uneven and she reached for release in desperation. As he grazed her gently with his teeth, the crescendo built to an intolerable level and finally crashed, and the pleasure

splintered throughout her entire body. She cried out in ecstasy.

Julian's tongue delved deep into her folds as she peaked, lapping up every bit of moisture which escaped as she convulsed inside. His tongue kept time with each spasm and it was too much, she was too sensitized, she couldn't take anymore of the sweet torment. But his hands held her captive and his mouth feasted on her until she collapsed back onto the bed, unmoving.

For a moment, the only audible sound was the harsh breathing coming from them both. Izzy didn't have the energy to lift her head from the pillow. Julian moved from between her legs and returned to her side, where he drew her snugly into the crook of his arm, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple.

Yet even from a haze of satiation she knew he was unsatisfied, his rampant arousal obvious through his breeches. She cursed her naivety, as she didn't know what to do for him.

When she could gather breath to speak, she turned to him "Julian?"

"Hmm?"

It was hard for her to say the words, but after the intimacy they'd just shared, how could she be ashamed to discuss anything with him?

"Why didn't you make love to me?"

He raised an eyebrow and a humorous glint lit his eyes. "If that wasn't making love to you, I don't know what would be."

Heat flooded her face, but she held his gaze. "But you weren't satisfied."

“Sweetheart, the taste of you coupled with your sweet cries was one of the most satisfying things I’ve ever experienced.”

His boldness shocked and titillated at the same time.

His expression softened. “Are you asking if I’m unsatisfied because I didn’t penetrate you and gain release as you did?”

She bit her lip and nodded, knowing her face must be as red as the soldiers’ coats of Cromwell’s New Model Army.

His voice turned husky. “God, I want to bury myself so deep inside you, you have no idea how much. And I will, soon. But it will be so good if we draw this out slowly. I promise, Sweetheart. By the time I finally make love to you fully, the anticipation will take us to heights you’ve never even dreamed of.”

She found it hard to believe, but then again until yesterday she’d never dreamed of the place he’d taken her today. If he said it was best to wait, then she would gladly acquiesce and let him set the pace. As long as he didn’t wait *too* long. Her wedding was approaching as quickly as a runaway carriage, only three weeks from now, and time was fast running out.

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Ram held Izzy in his arms, the urge to roll over and thrust inside her one he wasn’t sure he’d be able to resist much longer. It was going to be a long three weeks.

Her passion awed him. The trust she’d given him over her body humbled him. No matter how hard his cock was at this moment, no matter how much his brain berated him for an idiot, no matter how much every muscle quivered with agonized need to bed her right now,

he would take his time and do this right. She was to be his bride and deserved to be initiated into lovemaking in the most pleasurable of ways. And if he had to take a dip in the cold river to keep his heated body under control, then he would do so.

*But Holy God, her passion!* Never had he taken a woman to bed who'd responded to his touch with such unrestrained inhibition. She possessed such innate sensuality, and it was headier than any wine ever to get him soused. She was nothing like he expected when he'd imagined his faceless bride. She was *sweet* for Chrissakes, utterly adorable, as well as sensual. She'd turned his entire world upside down in a matter of days. And he wasn't sorry for it!

She shifted against him and he glanced at her face, noticing her muscles had relaxed as she dozed against him. Protectiveness the likes of which he'd never felt before rose and he swore then he'd do anything to protect this woman.

He frowned, thinking of the wedding day to come. She wasn't going to be happy when she discovered this deception. But hopefully, in the weeks leading up to that day he'd bind her to him with sensuality and desire, and perhaps even love, and that would lessen the sting. God knew he was half in love with her already. They would weather the storm and someday look back on these days with fondness and humor.

Oh Lord, the irony of it all! A handful of days ago he'd wanted nothing more than to find a way to avoid being leg shackled to this woman. Now he wanted her as his wife more than he'd ever imagined wanting any woman. And suddenly, their chance meeting seemed like

a stroke of luck. Instead of the cold, uncomfortable meeting that no doubt would have taken place if they'd met as strangers on their wedding day, he now had a chance to court her, without the usual restrictions and expectations. And he'd have the chance to earn her trust, to initiate his bride gently into lovemaking, assuring that she'd have no qualms in their bedchamber, that she'd find no fear in any act between them, that she'd experience no shame in anything that brought them mutual pleasure.

He'd promised Belinda he would leave Izzy's virginity intact until their wedding night, but at this rate, he wouldn't last another day. His body screamed for release, and not just from any woman. His body needed hers. She called to him like a siren, and he wouldn't be able to resist much longer, no matter the nobility of his intentions.

When she woke, he'd invent an excuse that would take him away for a few days, put some distance between them. It was for the best.

# Chapter 8

It was the worst thing that could have happened!

As Julian had brought her back to the riverbank after the earth shattering experience in the small hut, he'd told her he would be gone from the county for days, perhaps even as long as a se'nnight!

*Seven days?* She didn't have seven days! The infernal wedding was less than three weeks away and her virginity still very much intact. Her already desperate situation was now frantic.

As she walked home alone, thoughts tumbled through her mind in rapid succession. She could venture into town and find another man willing to do the deed.

Yet that somehow felt unfair to Julian. The thought made her gasp in despair. Her faithfulness shouldn't be pledged to Julian, but to Paul, dear, dear Paul. Whom she loved with all her heart.

But, Oh, God. She didn't feel guilt for betraying Paul when she was with Julian. She didn't think of Paul at all.

She meandered along the riverbank towards the manor house. Paul had been gone so long. But her love for him burned just as bright as when she'd last seen him, though it grew harder to conjure the memory of his face the more days that went by.

*Oh, Paul*, she sighed, as she picked up a rock and skipped it across the waters of the River Camel. *Where are you?* Parliament, under the leadership of General Monck, had invited the king to reclaim his country over a year ago, yet Paul had not yet returned.

Izzy had been so young when the Civil War arrived almost literally at their garden gate and become reality. Until then her father had remained neutral, hoping the political crisis between King and Parliament might be resolved without bloodshed.

But war came to Cornwall when Cromwell himself, with his troop of dragoons and fighting men, came to take Wadebridge, so close to Rendstell Manor. But things had calmed again with the winding down of the first Civil War.

When war broke out again a year later, Izzy's father decided it was too dangerous for them to remain in their home in Cornwall, especially since her eldest brothers had once again fought for Charles. Parliament had granted Loyal Royalists from the first civil war parole in exchange for their oath not to take up arms again. During the second Civil War, Cromwell was swift to execute any Royalists who'd disregarded that oath.

Once King Charles was beheaded, her father made the strategic decision to send Izzy, her mother, and Belinda to France where there was more stability, to stay with relatives of her mother. Then, two of Izzy's brothers had fought with the new King Charles at Worcester, but the royalist forces had met with defeat. The government seized Papa's lands and exile had been the only viable option. Her father claimed it was his preference anyway, as he wouldn't live under the command of the religious zealot who set about turning England into a nation held captive to Cromwell's God.

So many other Royalist exiles ended up abroad during the long years of Cromwell's reign, following Charles and his ragtag court from

Jersey, to St. Germain, and finally to Breda. The forced banishment from England was hard for them all and rumors of various uprisings were always whispered about, and indeed, Prince Rupert commanded troops made up of English exiles in the French army, ever looking for an opportunity to reclaim England for their poverty-stricken King without a country. Izzy's father invested nearly every pence he had for the cause of restoring the monarchy. Her brothers were instrumental in both fighting and ferreting information to and from the King and his advisors during the interregnum. Life became exciting, but uncertain.

It was during their stay in France she had met Paul for the first time. To a young girl of just ten years, he'd seemed an Adonis with his golden looks and his kindness. He'd often snuck her sweets and told her jokes to make her laugh.

Yet, as she'd grown, to Izzy's absolute delight, he'd looked at her differently. Instead of indulging her as a child, he'd treated her like a woman. A woman he'd clearly desired. His gentle teasing and thoughtful gifts turned into lingering glances and sweet caresses.

She'd been eighteen. He'd been off on the King's business and she hadn't seen him in quite a while. The night he returned, he had taken her for a walk in the privy garden. Her father had turned a blind eye, probably because they'd known each other so long and he trusted Paul to behave.

And he had. Well, except for the less than chaste kiss he'd given her that evening in a darkened corner. A kiss that made it apparent he'd begun to court her with marriage in mind. She'd adored him as a

child, but as a woman, she loved him fiercely. From that moment on, she belonged to Paul. She'd lived to see him during those stolen moments between his travels, lived for his kisses, lived for every bit of attention he gave her.

So how could she have these feelings for Julian now? She couldn't have developed serious affection for him, for they barely knew each other. And he was not of her class, he was forbidden to her, even if she decided she wanted him. Which she never would, because she loved Paul.

Not quite ready to return to Rendstell manor and face Belinda's inquiries, Izzy strolled along the riverbank until she found a dry spot upon which to sit and contemplate.

She conjured up an image of Paul the way he'd looked when last she'd seen him. He'd been dressed in the full regalia of a true Cavalier, with his petticoat breeches, over stockings tucked into his black cavalier boots and an outrageous purple doublet, complete with a cap adorned with a large feather. Yet, Izzy had never seen anyone more spectacular, no man more handsome.

Paul, as a younger son of a nobleman, didn't have much money, no inheritance to speak of, as most nobles had spent their money on the Royalist cause. Paul had fought for Charles, yes, because he was loyal, but too, it was widely expected Charles would handsomely reward all those who had remained loyal when he was restored.

Paul no longer wished to wait. After almost a decade of exile, it began to look as though Charles was never going to claim his throne. The King's cousin, Prince Rupert, had sailed off to the West Indies as a

buccaneer, and Paul wished to follow his example. Under Rupert he would prey on English shipping interests, take what money he could right from the grasp of Cromwell's coffers, make investments, and establish some kind of fortune for himself. The night he told her the news, Izzy was heartbroken.

*"Don't cry, Ma Petite, I'll not be gone long," he took her hand, wrapping his warm fingers around hers.*

*"But you'll be in such danger!"*

*He chuckled. "No more than I face now, looked upon as a traitor by my own country. And I swear, should the King be restored, I'll come home with all haste."*

*She was afraid to ask the question burning at her day and night, for he'd courted her, but never said the words. She forced the question from her lips. "Will we marry when you return?"*

*He didn't answer, but tightened his grip on her hands. "Right now I have nothing to my name, Izzy. Nothing to offer a woman as fine as you. I'm going after Rupert to make a fortune for myself. And do you know what I'll do with that fortune when I return?"*

*She shook her head in breathless anticipation. "Nay, what will you do?"*

*"I shall buy you your very own house, anywhere you desire. We will live in luxury and I will buy you only the very best money can buy."*

*Her heart soared. He did want to marry her! He just didn't feel worthy of her without a fortune to stand behind.*

*"Paul, I don't care if we live as paupers as long as we are together. You don't need to go off and do this for me!"*

*"Ah, my sweet," he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "You are every man's most fervent dream. But I need to do this for myself, as well."*

*She began to argue again, but he silenced her with a finger over her lips. "I must go, Izzy. And the time will fly by, you'll see. Will you wait for me?"*

*Holding back tears, she cried, "You know I will wait for you forever!"*

*"That's a good girl." He smiled and his eyes dropped to her mouth. His voice turned husky. "Give me a goodbye kiss, then."*

*She wrapped her arms around his neck, and standing on her tiptoes, leaned up to fuse her mouth to his. She put all the love and adoration she felt for him into that kiss, hoping he would remember it when he was lonely. Hoping it would speed him back to her someday soon.*

*And then he left, leaving her shattered.*

King Charles had been restored, yet Paul had not returned. *Why?* her anguished heart whispered. Could it be he no longer wanted her? That his absence was deliberate?

A twig snapped, drawing her out of her bittersweet memories. She whipped about to find Belinda standing behind her.

"Are you well, Izzy?" Belinda's voice was soft with worry.

"I'm not sure of anything anymore."

Belinda lowered herself to the grass beside her.

"I'm so confused, Bel."

"Has something happened?" Her cousin looked concerned.

"Julian must go away for a few days. And already the thought

of not seeing him tomorrow makes me miserable."

It almost looked as if Belinda was suppressing a smile. That couldn't be right, surely?

"'Tis only a few days, that can't be what's got you so upset?"

"How is Julian to take my virtue if he isn't here?"

Izzy gave in at the look of disbelief that crossed Belinda's face. "Fine! It's Paul I'm keep thinking of how disloyal I've been to Paul! I shouldn't miss any man *but* Paul."

Her cousin sighed, and Izzy wasn't sure if it was because Belinda was reminded of their uncomfortable conversation of yesterday, or for other reasons. "Izzy, you haven't seen Paul in nearly three years now. Perhaps he won't return. Will you pine for him for the rest of your days, then?"

"He promised he'd return. He's always kept his promises to me. And I promised I would wait for him." She picked a piece of grass out of the ground, tearing it into pieces with her fingers. *What if Belinda is right? What if Paul doesn't come back to me?*

"You've changed so very much during these years, Izzy. What if Paul has too? What if it's not love you still feel for him, but affection and obligation? What then?"

Could she have stopped loving Paul? Her eighteen-year-old self would have answered with an emphatic no. But now? Could she feel such excitement and attraction to Julian if she was still in love? With no answer apparent, she shrugged.

"Well, your Julian is very handsome. And, 'tis not so unusual to feel strongly about someone you are close to, even if you love

someone else."

"But that seems so disloyal!"

"Usually I'd say 'tis only disloyal if you act on those feelings. But that's your exact intent in this instance, so in a way one might say you are being disloyal. But you have no plans to continue to see Julian once he's taken your virtue. You'll be absolved of your obligation of the marital contract to the viscount, and there would be no reason to carry on with Julian."

Izzy started. If she no longer had to marry Viscount Royston, she'd have no further need to see Julian. Though it shouldn't, the idea of it dismayed her, confusing her all the more.

"Am I being disloyal, Bel?" she whispered, afraid to know the answer.

"Do you have a choice? If marrying Paul is your ultimate goal, then continuing with Julian seems the best way forward, does it not? You might feel disloyal for a time, but in the end you'll gain what you truly desire. I'm certain of it." Belinda put her hand over Izzy's, stopping her from obliterating more grass.

Izzy stared in surprise. "You think I should continue with my plan then?"

Belinda sighed. "Nay. I wish you would acquiesce to your father's wishes and marry the viscount. I'd also have you trust me, because I believe in the end you'll be very happy with the man your father chose for you. But knowing you as I do, I know you will not, and I only want you to be happy. Take the opportunity to find your happiness, Izzy."

The weight of the world seemed lifted from Izzy's shoulders with Belinda's support. She threw her arms around her surprised cousin and hugged her tight, giggling with her when they fell back onto the grass together.

"Does that mean you will help me?" Izzy asked, breathless, when they stopped laughing and rose to their feet.

"I will aid you."

"You'll never truly know how much I appreciate you, Bel."

## Chapter 9

*Two weeks until the wedding…*

It was going to be a miserable couple of weeks. Surely Ram wouldn't be sane by the time his wedding day came round.

He'd only managed to stay away from Cornwall for a se'nnight. Only seven days. One agonizing week during which thoughts of Izzy had haunted him, making him long to be back here in the country, in that cottage, trapped with her for hours on that small pallet, laughing and talking and making love to her. He felt a need to brand himself upon her, make such an impression upon each of her senses she'd have no notion of hunting up another rogue willing to defile her before their wedding day.

She was smart, she was sassy, she wore breeches, Bigod! And pranced about in them as though she were as comfortable in them as she was in her own skin. None of which were practical traits to look for in his future countess, yet he wanted her exactly the way she was.

It was insanity. There was no other way to explain it. How else had he gone from looking forward to a May Day romp in the grass with a pretty girl, to wanting that girl as his wife? Aye, he'd gone utterly daft, surely, and more, he was happy to remain so!

He paced before the hut, looking every so often to Mercury for signs that the stallion's ears had perked up at a sound, or anything that might signify he'd soon see Izzy crest the hill.

When she finally did, his breath caught in his throat. In relief, aye, but also because she was stunning. Wearing the same breeches and shirt as she had done last week, she'd chosen to leave her hair down, and it flowed in sparkling magnificence down her back. She'd left it down for him, he was sure of it.

Without realizing it, he had covered half the distance to meet her as she approached. “You came,” he blurted, feeling suddenly foolish and overeager. *Get control, Ram, you aren’t a boy of fourteen!*

“Good morn,” she smiled, before adding “I’ve come each day since you left, hoping you might return sooner.”

She’d waited for him every day? His adoration for her grew nearly by the moment. “I told you at least seven days, love. You didn’t have to come every day.”

She shrugged one delicate shoulder. “It never hurts to hope.” She blushed prettily and Ram’s heart thudded.

“Shall we go inside?” he motioned to the hut. “I’ve brought lunch.”

Her eyes lit. “’Twould be lovely.”

Holding the door open for her, he motioned for her to enter, leaning in to inhale her delicate scent as she passed. Lavender. He would forever think of Izzy when he smelled lavender.

She took a seat at the small table, reaching for the basket he’d had Cook fill with lunch food. It had been difficult when he explained the needed simple fare. No fancy cheeses or haunches of meat. It was important Izzy not become suspicious of his identity before the wedding.

“This is so thoughtful,” she murmured as she peeled back the blanket inside and unpacked items onto the table. Cook hadn’t let him down. She’d included  pasties, a meal any good Cornish man would eat any day. Two apples followed the pasties, along with the wine they never drank last time.

As she set the food out for each of them and poured the wine, she made conversation. “Did you complete your business, then?”

“What do you mean, Sweetheart?”

“Whatever it was you had to leave Cornwall for. I assumed your employer needed you to travel with or for him?”

Ram almost choked on a bite of pasty. Obviously, he’d never considered telling her where he’d gone or even *why* he’d gone. So it was easiest to agree with the excuse she’d provided. And she’d unwittingly provided him with a reason for another absence. “Aye,” he answered vaguely. “And aye, everything went fine, though I must leave again, soon.”

Dismay colored her features, and though he hated to upset her, pleasure blossomed outwards from his chest. She didn’t want him to go. He longed to tell her who he really was and that in two weeks they’d never be apart again. But discretion was ever the better part of valor and it was best not to upset the scheme he and Belinda had set in motion.

She reached for an apple and took a bite out of it. Ram watched, fascinated, as some of the succulent juice from the fruit trailed down her chin. Giggling, she reached for a napkin, but he put his hand on her arm, halting her. He now knew exactly how Eve tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden with that damned apple. If Eve had been anything like Izzy, Adam never stood a chance.

Standing, he moved around the table to her side, bending so he could trace the trail of juice left by the apple with his tongue. She held utterly still as he licked every bit of the sweetness from her chin, then

followed the trail up to her lips. With the tip of his tongue he traced first her top lip, stopping to delve into the creases at the corners, and then the bottom one, before tugging the whole of it into his mouth, gently nibbling.

With a small cry she let the apple fall from her hand to land with a thud on the table. Then her arms were wound about his neck, her luscious body pressed against him, kissing him back with a passion that sent instant heat flaring through him.

He knew he should stop, he wouldn't take Izzy's virginity before their wedding day and he didn't know how far he could go before he reached his breaking point. But there was no force on Earth at that moment that could compel him to take his mouth from hers.

Her searching hands were already tugging his shirt from his breeches. Warm palms slid underneath the fabric to skim over the flesh of his chest, causing goose bumps to rise in their wake. When her fingernail trailed over one of his taut nipples, his control snapped.

He swept the contents of the table clear with one arm, paying no heed to the sound of basket and porcelain crashing to the floor. Lifting her by the waist, he set her upon the table's edge. Her legs parted as they dangled over the side, and he moved between them, feeling the scorching heat from her even through his breeches. That this woman burned for him alone made him the luckiest man alive

They moved in unison, he reaching for her shirt just as she raised her arms to aid him in the removal of the article of clothing. At the sight of her pale, rounded breasts, his mouth went dry. Her nipples hardened under his avid gaze and he licked his lips. He bent to

taste one, her small whimper of pleasure like a symphony to his ears.

But today she was impatient. He was surprised to feel her hands at the waistband of his breeches. He ought to stop her, but God, he wanted her hands on him! Just the thought of her handling his cock sent blood rushing to the body part in question, and he thickened and lengthened, hardening even more.

He was about to put a stop to her exploration when she cupped him through his breeches. Coherent thought fled as she caressed his length, tentatively feeling and exploring. He was lost.

Aiding her in her sensual quest, he tugged at his breeches, letting them fall to the ground around his ankles. Her eyes widened as his straining shaft sprung free, and he cursed low. What if the sight of his rampant cock repulsed her? He should have slowly introduced her to his body. She was, after all, a virgin. But damn, the woman tested the limits of his control unlike anything or anyone ever had before!

With a look on her face that could only be described as awe, she reached one finger out and stroked him, tentatively at first and then with growing enthusiasm. He should have known his Izzy was different. She wrapped an unsure hand around him at the base then slid her hand along his length slowly, exploring the different contours with hand and fingertips. She held him with a loose grip, but still, her touch thrilled him more than he could have ever dreamed. The urge to tear off her breeches and bury himself in her hot, satiny sheath nearly overwhelmed his control, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to remain still beneath her exploration.

Her fingers found the head of his shaft and she used one finger

to circle the tiny hole at the tip, smoothing the drop of moisture she found there around and around, using it to lubricate both her hand and his cock.

When her fingers grasped him again and slid down to the base with a surer, firmer touch, the friction and tightness of her grip tore a hoarse groan from him.

He glanced at her face. She was wholly focused upon her study, her plump lips parted as she breathed heavily. He could see the power she wielded over him excited her, so he held still and continued to let her do as she wished.

Her fingers found one of his testicles. When she cupped it in her hand his cock bucked and her eyes widened, first with surprise, then with delight. Gently she rolled it with her fingers, feeling the texture, testing the size, tormenting him. Just as he was about to make her cease, her free hand grasped his cock again and stroked, while the other, still holding his testicle, cradled it in her palm. He threw his head back, awed by her innocent sensuality and her complete lack of self-consciousness and guile. She was a rare gem. He reveled in the pleasure she bestowed upon him, never wanting it to end.

Nevertheless, he knew it must. He broke the contact of her hands from his most sensitive body parts, intending to bring them both back under control. Except, he was thinking with the wrong head, and instead of saying the words he should, he leaned in for her mouth again and she obliged without reserve. He cupped her breasts, kneading gently, tugging at her erect nipples. He yearned to feel her flesh against his and despite his best intentions he unfastened her

breeches and slid them down her legs. When he leaned in to kiss her again, the movement brought his shaft into contact with the soft flesh of her belly. His teeth clenched as he struggled for control.

His hand dipped between her legs, finding her slick and hot to the touch, setting off a primal urge within him.

*Mine!*

Though his body yearned to make her his right then, he knew he could not.

He could not!

Gritting his teeth, he eased her back on the table and settled more snugly between her legs. Then he gripped his shaft and placed it flush against the opening of her body. Izzy's eyes widened. He smiled to reassure her and once again her eyes drooped to half-lidded. A mixture of wonder and curiosity flowed across her features as she watched everything he did with avid interest. The trust she placed in him humbled him.

*What the hell am I doing?*

His tortured mind didn't know the answer, as all the blood used to operate his brain had fled south.

Placing the head of his shaft against her slick folds, he rubbed forward and back, coating himself with her moisture. Her breath hitched as he moved against her sensitized skin. She became slippery with need and Ram was in hell, excruciatingly aware of how easy it would be to take her right then; with just one thrust of his hips the deed would be done and she'd be his. But he mustn't. He reined in his control and continued to rub against her, denying the demands of his

body. Her head dropped back and Ram watched, fascinated, as her breasts rose and fell in time with her heavy breathing. She was beyond beautiful, beyond breathtaking. He didn't own the words to adequately describe her in that moment.

Pulling back, he placed the head of his cock at the entrance of her body, pushing forward just the smallest bit. He needed to be inside her, to claim her, even if he went no farther. Which he wouldn't. Her head snapped up and she gasped at the entry, but there was no apprehension on her face. She looked…mesmerized.

He pulled back again, then moved forward a little further, shifting so his cock rubbed against her swollen bud. He was on the edge. Her body was so hot and tight around him, urging him onward, it was wholly possible he'd reached the point of no return, his promise to Miss Spencer be damned.

With one hand he rotated his shaft from side to side, noting the increase in her breathing and the swelling of her flesh as signs of her impending climax. The thumb of his other hand delved into her moist curls, finding the sensitive nub hidden beneath, and moved in tiny circles, progressively applying more pressure.

She whimpered and thrashed and when she finally came, it was with such force her cry of pleasure was no doubt audible outside the little cottage. Her inner muscles clenched around his tip, convulsing, grasping at him, beckoning him to thrust forward until he was embedded within her hot sheath, but he somehow managed to resist. Instead, he pushed down on the table and withdrew from her body, placing his cock between her slick folds lengthwise. He slid back and

forth, back and forth, as the pleasure built and his balls tightened against his body. With a great shudder he came, throwing his head back with a growl as his seed erupted, landing on her bare belly in hot spurts.

For a moment there was no sound at all. His climax had been so powerful it dulled his senses. Then a buzzing filled his ears and his blurred vision came into focus. He stared in wonderment at the woman before him, the cause of it all.

He'd made a hell of a mess. Ram yanked his breeches to his waist and then bent to retrieve a linen napkin from where it landed on the floor. He approached again, and her eyes twinkled as she lay back, allowing him to clean her.

The sight of his pearly semen on her pale skin once again set off primal, possessive, and altogether new urges. He'd placed his brand on her in the most intimate way possible.

*Mine!*

She didn't yet know it, but she belonged to him. And there was nothing she could do to change that, nothing he'd countenance coming between them. Not her lies, nor even his own. He would find a way, no matter what it took. He wasn't a whimsical man by anyone's reckoning, but what he'd found with Izzy was magic, pure and simple.

When they were both clean and had retrieved the remains of their lunch from the floor, they lay on the pallet snuggling. By the time they had to leave, lingering over parting kisses that turned into hot passionate kisses because another week would go by before they saw one another again, he was in a state of painful arousal once more.

He became obsessed with thoughts of their wedding night. Perhaps he'd keep her abed for a fortnight after the wedding. After all, he had much to teach her and she was a most apt pupil.

For now, however, he needed space, he needed to keep his distance or he'd break his vow. Lucien, the younger son of the Marquess of Bideford and Ram's closest friend, might be in residence at the family seat in Devon. Ram would go there for the next se'nnight.

His arousal made it uncomfortable to ride and he groaned aloud as he ambled back to Royston Manor with Mercury. On his way out of town, he'd stop to take a dip in the cold waters of the River Camel. Perhaps that might cool his ardor.

Damn. He was behaving like a youth crazed with his first taste of desire. He would never sully himself with another woman now that he had the anticipation of Izzy in his bed for the rest of his life. But if ever there was a time he could use the services of a prostitute, it was now.

# Chapter 10

Izzy needed the services of a prostitute.

She'd come to the determination while pacing in her bedchamber, contemplating the delay in the loss of her virginity.

It was very sweet that Julian wanted to build the anticipation of their lovemaking, but she didn't have time to wait on romantic notions.

She needed an expert. Someone who could teach her what she must do to drive a man over the edge, make him incapable of controlling his lust.

And she knew just the woman.

In the village of Egloshayle, a woman called Maura was rumored to have pleasured every man of the village at some time or another. Even Izzy's own brothers had been her customers a time or two. Of course, if they ever discovered she'd followed them on their adventures in their youth, they would box her ears for it. She knew when her youngest brother turned fourteen the elder two had brought him to Maura so he could be "initiated," as they'd called it.

Izzy wasn't proud of her spying, but today it would stand her in good stead. She would hie to the village and seek the woman's advice, if Maura still made her home there.

Dressed again in the peasant clothing she'd worn on May Day, Izzy grabbed a handful of coins and put them into a purse. After all, she had no idea what a prostitute might charge for her services.

Gathering the courage for what she was about to do, she used the servants' stairs, sneaking out of Rendstell Manor while praying nary a soul would miss her.

At a brisk walk it took less than thirty minutes to reach the village. Maura worked in the tavern by night, but by day she kept a small thatched cottage nestled in an alleyway off the High Street. Situated conveniently close to the tavern, she was able to take customers home at the end of the evening with only a few minutes' walk.

Taking a deep breath to bolster her courage, Izzy lifted her hand and knocked on the crooked wooden door.

When it swung open, Izzy stared at the woman on the other side of the door in shocked surprise. Had she stumbled upon the wrong house? It was true it had been near a decade since Izzy had seen her, but the woman standing in the portal had aged drastically in the ensuing years. No longer plump and rosy with youth, the woman staring back at Izzy with hard eyes was haggard and drawn. Her frame was lumpy beneath her clothing, and breasts that were once her pride and joy now hung woefully low, like teats on a nursing pig.

She took Izzy's measure in a glance, her gaze going from the top of Izzy's cap-adorned head down to her feet. And then she waited in silence.

"Maura?" Izzy whispered, afraid she might offend this woman if she were not the famed prostitute.

"Aye," the woman acknowledged, as she leaned around Izzy to spit against the outer wall. "I'm Maura. And yer the Baron's gel."

Izzy's breath caught. So, her disguise wouldn't conceal her after all. *Drat.* Well, there was nothing to be done now. She could only pray no one might happen by and recognize her at the door of a prostitute's home.

"May I come in? I've business of a sort to discuss with you."

"I don't imagine wot kind of business the likes of ye might 'ave with me, but come in, if'n ye want." Maura held the door wide and Izzy entered the little cottage. To her surprise, it was very neat inside. A pot filled with a meat stew boiled on the hearth and the aromatic smell of bundled herbs hanging from the rafters wafted through the room.

A sturdy table stood pressed against the wall near the door, and the rest of the room was taken up by a large pallet. Izzy couldn't help but wonder how many men had awoken in that bed after an evening of debauchery.

After she'd looked her fill, her glance came back to rest on Maura, who seemed to be waiting for her to explain her presence. Nervously Izzy pulled the small purse she'd tied to her waistband and ventured to the table.

She laid it on the wooden surface, and then turned back.

Maura's expression turned sour, as if she'd tasted something unpalatable. "I don't do women."

"What?" Izzy blinked, at a complete loss.

Maura sighed. "I'll not lay with ye. No matter 'ow much money ye put afore me."

Izzy gasped. Was such a thing done? Did women lie together?

How was that possible? Questions swirled through her mind, her curiosity piqued to the highest levels, but she wrangled her thoughts back to the matter at hand. There was time to ponder Maura's words another time. Right now, she needed the woman's aid.

Maura seemed prickly at the perceived offer, so Izzy sought to put her at ease. "Nay, Maura. You misunderstand. I only have need of information. Advice. Lessons, if you will."

Maura's eyes narrowed with suspicion, though her glance shot to the bag of coins on the table. Had business slowed in recent years? Surely younger, prettier prostitutes had taken her place in the village, even more so with the King restored and morality loosened after a decade of tight-fisted puritanical rule. Izzy couldn't help but feel sorry for this woman, so ravaged and aged before her years. Her life must be very difficult.

"Wot kind of information would ye be needing?"

Now that the moment was upon her, Izzy found it difficult to force the words from her throat. She'd had trouble bringing the subject up with Julian, and he was her lover. This woman was a complete stranger.

"I need advice in your, um, area of expertise." Feeling her cheeks heat, she couldn't meet the other woman's gaze, her eyes flitting all about the small hut, looking anywhere but at the prostitute.

But she could sense Maura's surprise. "Ye need to learn how to tup a man?" she asked, right before she cackled.

The heat rose even hotter in Izzy's face. "You see, there is a particular gentleman. I would like for him to, um, tup me, but he's…

resistant."

"Into the gents, is 'e?" Maura nodded knowingly.

"Nay!" Izzy cried, shocked and unnerved, again. How could a man be "into" other men? It made no sense at all! She lowered her voice. "Nay. He desires *me*." She took a deep breath, seeking fortitude. "He's made it very clear he wants me. But each time I think "it" will happen, well, it doesn't."

"Ye mean 'e won't fill yer 'ole?"

A small moan of dismay slipped through Izzy's lips. It would be easier to just die of embarrassment, but she held onto her composure as tightly as she could. And nodded her confirmation. "N-nay. He's done everything else, he just won't do *that*."

Maura turned contemplative for a long moment and when she turned to speak, Izzy steeled herself for whatever the prostitute was about to say. In the span of the five minutes or so Izzy had been in the woman's company, she'd discovered there was a wealth of information she lacked about the world. Apparently, she was woefully ignorant. And Maura had no qualms about enlightening her in a very outright manner.

Maura didn't disappoint. "Is yer cunny clean?" she asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

Izzy blinked. "My cunny?"

Maura pointed towards Izzy's groin.

Her mortification now complete, Izzy wanted nothing more than to flee the small cottage and this woman with her blunt statements. She wanted to forget she'd ever heard anything about

women “doing” women, men desiring other men, and prying questions about her own cleanliness. But she needed Maura’s help more than she needed to avoid this embarrassment.

“Aye.” She struggled with the words. “I take care to cleanse very well.”

“Does ‘e go soft on ye then?” Maura ticked the question off on her finger. Izzy shook her head to indicate that wasn’t the issue, then braced herself as Maura raised another finger. “Does ‘e spill ‘is see afore ‘e can get it inside ye?”

“Nay! He claims he wants to take the…consummation of our relationship slowly, he believes he’s being respectful!”

Maura snorted. “If the man is taking ye to bed wi’out fucking ye good an’ hard, ye can be sure ‘e’s got sumthin’ planned, sumthin’ ‘e ain’t tellin’ ye.”

Izzy went still, considering for a moment whether Julian might be lying to her about something, then rejected the idea. What reason would he have to deceive her? Nay, she’d know if Julian were trying to trick her in some way. She trusted him completely. She ignored Maura’s statement.

“What can I do to get him to, um, go all the way?”

Maura grunted, stroking her chin as though considering Izzy’s problem in greater detail. And then, “’ave you polished ‘is knob?” A knowing smirk curved her lips as she awaited Izzy’s likely predictable response. Obviously the prostitute was gaining great amusement at her expense.

“P-polished his knob?”

Maura sighed with exaggerated exasperation, as if she was dealing with a small child who had trouble comprehending, “Have ye pleasured ‘im with yer mouth?” Maura asked, her question slow and deliberate.

Izzy gasped again. And then shock gave way to a vivid image of the act Maura must mean. Izzy had never thought of doing *that*. Did decent women even contemplate such a thing? Would Julian enjoy it?

“Surely ‘e’s pleasured ye in such a way?”

Izzy nodded, not really paying attention to Maura as she pondered the possibility of using her mouth to pleasure Julian. Why hadn’t that idea come to her? After all, she’d enjoyed it so much when he’d done it to her. It made sense he might enjoy the same.

“Would ye like to know ‘ow?”

The question startled Izzy from her thoughts and she almost declined Maura’s offer out of hand. Now that the idea was planted firmly in her mind she doubted it could be overly difficult. But then doubts niggled at her. Obviously, if today was any indication, she was woefully ignorant in these matters. If she wanted guaranteed success she must do it right, and the woman before her *was* the expert. Perhaps she should accept the offer.

“You could teach me?” Izzy whispered, wondering how that could be done and whether it would be worth her discomfort to accept Maura’s lesson and whatever it entailed.

“I might as well earn those coins ye put on me table.”

Izzy nodded in agreement, taking a seat in tense silence as she awaited the start of her lesson.

What she learned in the next ten minutes would forever be burned into her memory in exacting detail. Maura, not having anything at hand to substitute for a man's organ, used two of her own fingers, pushed upright and together, as a demonstrative tool.

"Ye must lick at it like this," she went on to show Izzy exactly what she meant, using her tongue to delicately lap at the tip. "Tease 'im a wee bit, afore ye take him full into yer mouth." Maura slid her fingers into her mouth, slowly moving up and down over them.

Izzy gulped. Apparently it was much more involved than she could have imagined.

"Don't forget yer 'and though. While you suckle on 'im, make sure you squeeze 'im and stroke it at the same time. And never ferget 'is balls. Ye can lick those too." Maura continued to lick her fingers, but used her other hand in an up and down manner at the same time.

What Maura was doing to her own fingers was graphic and disturbing, yet Izzy found her interest piqued, and she thrilled to the notion of pleasuring Julian in such a way.

Then a thought occurred to her, ruining the anticipation. "Will it taste bad?"

Maura stopped sucking her fingers. "Depends on yer man. If 'e's a clean one, 'e should taste jes' fine."

Izzy nodded, prepared to thank the woman and take her leave, but Maura continued on.

"One last thing. If ye want 'im in yer 'ole, don't let 'im spend 'isself in yer mouth, or 'e won't 'ave nothing left."

Izzy swallowed hard, absorbing this last piece of wisdom. She

was ready to escape from this hut and ponder the things Maura had told her, and perhaps even put them to use when Julian returned.

"I am very grateful for your help, Maura. Could I ask that you not repeat to anyone I was here?"

The prostitute chuckled, grasped the coin purse off the table, and tucked it into her voluminous blouse. "Yer secret is safe with me, gel. I know when to keep me secrets to meself. Go 'ave some fun with yer man. An' feel free to come back anytime if ye need to learn more secrets from ole Maura."

Izzy forced a smile and let herself out of the cottage. She didn't know what more she might not know, and she wasn't sure she ever wanted to find out. And if she ever needed further schooling, well, she was sure Julian, or later on Paul, would be more than happy to instruct her.

When she reached the High street, she picked up the pace and dashed back to the manor. There were only four days until Julian returned and less than two weeks until her wedding to Viscount Royston. She had much to do if she were to achieve her goal.

Her nipples tightened as she contemplated doing the things Maura had shown her to Julian. She couldn't wait to put her newly learned skill to good use.

# Chapter 11

*One week until the wedding…*

For the third time, Ram approached the door to the crofters hut, then turned away without opening it. He ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated. More than anything, he wanted to open the door, take Izzy into his arms, and make love to her all afternoon. On the other hand, he didn't know if he trusted himself to stop at the edge one more time. He was going out of his mind.

He should have stayed away. Just one more week until their wedding day. Only seven more days and this torment would be over. He didn't look forward to facing an enraged Izzy when she learned the truth of his identity, but he was confident it wouldn't take much to earn her forgiveness.

There was still plenty left for him to do in London, where he'd gone upon discovering his friend, Lucien, wasn't in residence in Devon. He could leave Cornwall now and Izzy would never know he'd been here. He could return to the city and finish making his home ready for his bride and their new life.

In the past week, he'd extricated himself from one irate mistress, and now, with that unpleasant task behind him, he was ready for marital bliss. There had been tears, cajoling, and pleading, but in the end he and Louisa had both walked away satisfied. He'd deeded her the townhouse which he'd bought for their use months

before, and she promised to disappear from his life for good. An expensive trade-off, aye, but well worth it just the same. He wanted everything to be perfect when he brought Izzy home for the first time.

As he paced in indecision, he thought about the vagaries of fate. Louisa had been his mistress for a fairly short period of time and he'd been content with her when he'd set her up in the small, but luxurious townhouse. Now the thought of keeping a mistress was frankly distasteful. How could he even contemplate keeping another woman when Izzy would always be waiting for him to come home?

He had to make a decision. If Izzy was inside, it was only a matter of time until she opened the door to leave, as it was already more than an hour past the agreed upon meeting time. What could he say if she found him pacing outside the door, afraid to enter?

He should leave. Remove any risk of temptation. Even as he told himself that, he reached for the door. He had to see her, if only for a little while. He need only control himself this one last time. When next he saw her she would become his wife and there would be no more need for restraint.

His breath caught as he stepped inside, catching sight of her expression from where she sat on the pallet. She looked…desolate. But as soon as she raised her head and saw him, the sorrow disappeared from her eyes and a brilliant smile lit her face. It made him want to go away often just so he could see that expression on her face each time he returned to her.

"You came!"

His heart turned over. Had she really been so devastated that

he might not come?

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Sweet-" Before he finished the sentence, she threw herself into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, straining her mouth toward his.

It was an invitation impossible to resist.

The taste of her was so sweet, he realized then she satiated a hunger he never even knew burned within him. He might have deluded himself that all was well when they were apart, but the feel of her in his arms made him whole, brought into sharp focus that each day without her had been utterly lacking.

He cradled her face in both hands, kissing her with a tenderness he hoped bespoke of the feelings welling inside of him. He'd never been a romantic by nature and he didn't believe in love at first sight, but his feelings for this woman were alien to him. He wasn't yet ready to label it love, for that was an emotion he had little experience with, but he needed her unlike he'd ever needed another woman. It bordered almost upon obsession.

Not a fortnight, it wasn't enough. Once they married he'd keep her locked in their bedchamber for at least a month.

Her hair hung loose down her back and he adored her all the more for leaving it down, for she'd done it for him. He ran his fingers through her chestnut tresses, loving the silky feel against his skin and the way the strands clung to him almost possessively. Then he bent, scooped her into his arms, and carried her to the pallet. He lay beside her. She turned onto her side, reaching for him, but instead he tucked her close against him, sliding his arm under her head to pillow her.

With his free hand he reached for hers, entwining his fingers with hers. She stared at him, her blue eyes wide and luminescent, questioning.

He cleared his throat. “You have my most sincere apology for being so late. I should have been here much earlier.”

Her smile was soft. “’Tis all right. I’m sure whatever kept you was important.”

He’d been an idiot to waste so much time waffling with indecision. “Nothing is more important than being here with you, right now.” He meant every word.

She grinned, a quirking of her lips that was both saucy and challenging. “Then prove it.” Her voice was husky, flowing over to warm him like whisky on a cold day.

“You are incorrigible!” he laughed and tapped her nose.

“Mmm. I know. ‘Tis what you love most about me.”

She was probably right.

His breath caught as she leaned over and pressed her lips to his neck. Her soft kisses sent waves of heat rippling through his body.

To his surprise, she bolted upright, swinging one leg over his hips until she was straddling him, her knees resting on the pallet on either side of his waist. In a flash he imagined her atop him the exact same way, yet completely unclothed, riding them both to the heights of ecstasy. Every ounce of blood thundered through his body with the same destination in mind. His cock rose in his breeches, straining at the material. By the widening of her eyes and then her quick smile, he knew she noted his instant physical response.

She dipped her face toward his, resting her chin on her folded arms against his chest. The motion brought her backside into close contact with his shaft and he bit back a groan.

“Am I too heavy?”

He snorted. “You weigh scarcely more than a bird.”

“But you seem so uncomfortable.” Her voice was teasing and she wiggled her backside against him, the motion sweet torment. His need to touch her grew almost out of control.

Taking her hips in his hands, he ground her against his throbbing arousal. “If I’m uncomfortable, ‘tis only because you deem it necessary to keep me so, Sweetheart.”

She laughed, a sound so sweet, yet so tormenting at the same time. Her eyes darkened and her tongue flicked out to wet her lips.

“We must remedy that situation, posthaste.” She said before brushing a kiss across his lips. Then she sat again. Her nimble fingers tugged at his white shirt, pulling it from his breeches. Warm fingers swept beneath the material, stroking lightly against his fevered flesh. He shivered at her touch.

God, he needed to take control, but he bade himself be still and let her have her way. He couldn’t wait to see what she planned. It both scared and excited him.

Her hands slid up, her fingernails raked over his nipples and he sucked in a breath. Then her hands dipped down to the hem of the shirt, lifting it to bare him to her gaze.

Her pupils dilated with pleasure and he saw only the top of her head as she leaned down, using her mouth to follow the trail of her

fingers. She crept her way up his chest, her tongue and teeth driving him crazy with tiny nips and gentle laving. Her small teeth grazed one of his nipples and he bucked beneath her. His patience at its end, he slid his hands up her back, prepared to pull her mouth up to his, but she reached for his arms and lifted them above his head the way he'd once done to her, making it clear she intended to remain in control.

He narrowed his eyes.

He could practically feel her self-satisfied smile against his skin and it took every ounce of patience he had to hold onto the last vestige of restraint and not grab her and flip her onto her back.

Sliding the shirt over his arms and head, Izzy sent it flying with a flick of her wrist.

He gritted his teeth as her fingers went to the waistband of his breeches. It was time for him to take control, before he lost control.

"Izzy-"

"Shh." Her voice was a whisper.

Sweat formed on his brow as her fingers found the fastenings of his breeches and unlaced them. She shifted her body down his, the hardened peaks of her breasts scorching him through the fabric of her shirt as she slid lower.

He would die if he didn't soon touch her.

All thought fled as she tugged his breeches down, releasing his shaft to spring free. Exposed to the warm air in the hut and her even warmer gaze, his cock thickened and grew yet harder. She continued to peel his breeches down his legs, her breasts grazing his groin, followed by the soft, trailing ends of her hair as she moved. He bit

back a groan as his erection strained toward her.

And then her cheek was there and thoughts of what she could do to him with her lips and tongue ricocheted through his mind. As if she were able to read his innermost desires, she grasped him with one hand, then turned her face so her breath feathered over his sensitive flesh. Ram held his breath. Surely she wouldn't…

Her hand stroked up and down. His breath whooshed out of him as her tongue lapped over the head of his cock. Looking down, he couldn't believe how intensely erotic it was to watch as she tasted him, her hair flowing like a waterfall to cover half her face.

With her tongue she explored the ridge below the head, then slowly licked all the way down to the base. Her hand followed her mouth, squeezing him as it slid down, then back up again.

He clenched his fists.

And then she took him into her mouth and he rose up off the mattress, almost losing control right then. He groaned with the pleasure of the moist heat of her mouth combined with the gentle suction. A small sound of delight escaped her as she took him against the back of her throat, and Ram was nearly undone.

"Izzy"- he gasped, but she paid no heed to his plea. She looked up at him, met his eyes, and he was lost…so lost. Her motion increased and she continued pleasuring him with her mouth, taking him in as far as she could, then releasing him and repeating the act all over again. Her fingers persisted in stroking his cock, her hand closing more firmly around him, using her own saliva as a lubricant to keep him slippery. Each time her mouth released him her fingers continued

up to squeeze the head of his cock before sliding back down once again. Her left hand cradled one of his balls and began to massage.

*Holy Hell. Where had she learned to do this?*

The thought fled as once again she took him deep and he came close to spilling his seed.

"Izzy, you must stop." The words came out on a groan, but still she ignored him. Instead, her stroking and sucking became more rapid and she moved faster and faster over him. Her mouth was hot and wet around him, it was madness to think he could resist. His balls tightened and the base of his spine tingled as his body prepared to erupt. He tried to pull away before he came, but she held on with tenacious determination.

Stars burst behind Ram's eyelids and he gripped the sheets beneath him. He exploded in one of the most powerful climaxes of his life. A ragged groan escaped his lips as his seed spurted. Her mouth remained clamped about him as she swallowed his offering, using her mouth and tongue to lap at anything that had escaped.

His head slumped against the pillow as he laid there, his forearm thrown over his eyes, trying to catch his breath, while only one thought filled his mind.

*I'm crazy in love with this woman!*

***

Izzy glowed with satisfaction for approximately three minutes before ultimate dismay took its place. Maura had warned her not to let Julian spill his seed, ere he not be able to make love to her, yet she hadn't heeded the woman's advice.

*What have I done?*

The truth was she had enjoyed the pleasure she gave Julian so much she'd disregarded all warnings, both Julian's and Maura's. When Julian climaxed, it caught her by surprise, though she had to admit she loved the feeling of power her control over him had garnered within her.

Panic set in. She'd not asked Maura how long it took a man to recover between sessions of lovemaking. Could a man even do it more than once a day? Had she just lost her last chance to lose her maidenhead?

Aside from dismay at her lack of control, Izzy felt a deep dissatisfaction within her own body. Giving Julian such pleasure had aroused her to unbearable heights and now she suffered because she'd not gained release as he had.

The urge to weep almost overwhelmed her.

She managed to pull herself together just as Julian removed his arm from across his face, lifting his head to look at her. His gaze was so tender, her heart thumped with wild abandon.

"I-I don't know what to say, Izzy. 'Twas incredible."

She breathed a sigh of relief. At least she'd managed to do one thing right.

Leaning down, he grasped her arm and tugged her up beside him on the pallet, tucking her against his side and wrapping his strong arms around her. Izzy inhaled deeply of his scent and some of her panic subsided. They still had time yet, she would find a way to give Julian her virtue.

He pressed a kiss to her temple. “You are amazing.”

She flushed. “You don’t have to say that.”

“Nay, Sweetheart, I do. Now let me show you how grateful I am.”

She looked at him in question, but he was already unfastening her breeches, and quickly slipped them down her legs.

His hand floated down towards her thighs, combing through the dark curls there, then lightly running his fingertips over her exposed flesh. “Have you ever pleasured yourself, Izzy?” his breath feathered across her cheek.

She shook her head.

“Then let me teach you, so you can do it when I’m not here to do it for you.”

Swallowing hard, she nodded in tentative agreement. She’d only ever touched herself during the act of bathing, and never with lascivious intent. What he suggested both shocked and intrigued her. It was one thing to derive pleasure from his touch, but surely she’d not be able to bring herself the same kind of pleasure?

Julian took her hand, covering her fingers with his, and tugged her arm down until her hand hovered between her legs.

She jumped when her fingers made contact with her slick flesh. She was so hot!

Julian guided her as he let her explore her own folds. The feeling was exquisite because she controlled her own pleasure. Her finger sought the sensitive spot she hadn’t even known existed until she met Julian, and she experimented with pressing, rubbing, and

squeezing it. His hand never left hers. He paid avid attention to each of her movements and reactions, as though memorizing what she liked most.

He pressed on her forefinger, guiding it to the entrance of her body. As her finger slipped inside, she marveled over how hot she was within, as she explored the curious ridges inside her own body.

Her hips began to shift restlessly and Julian gave up his guidance, letting her take the lead. As she stroked herself, that delicious tightening feeling began. Julian whispered encouraging words into her ear, describing in great detail the wicked things he wanted to do to her and all the different ways he would do them, telling her things that should have made her blush but instead only heightened her arousal.

His free hand swept up to cup her breast, squeezing her nipple between his fingers. His touch pushed her over the edge. Her body convulsed around her fingers as she exploded with pleasure.

Izzy collapsed back against the pillows, sated.

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When she next opened her eyes the sun was far lower in the sky. Rolling over on the pallet, she found Julian awake at her side, watching her.

“How long have I been asleep?” She furrowed her brow.

He reached out one finger and smoothed the skin between her eyes. “An hour, perhaps two.”

She gasped, sitting up in alarm. How could she have allowed herself to fall asleep? Belinda was sure to be searching for her by now

as she'd only told her family she was going for a morning ride.

"I didn't want to wake you, but I'm afraid it's grown late and I must be on my way. And surely your mother is wondering as to your whereabouts by now."

"What?" *Nay!* This was it. Her last chance to give away her virginity. If Julian didn't take it, there was every reason to believe she'd be a married woman at this time next week.

In sheer desperation she reached for him, pulling his mouth to hers. He answered her hungrily seeking mouth- but only for a moment. The true regret in his eyes as he pulled back didn't appease her.

"I really must go, Sweetheart. Will I see you in a se'nnight?"

She nodded in misery as she perpetuated the lie. She couldn't bring herself to tell him this would be their last time together. Watching as he rolled off the mattress and began to dress, she struggled to hold on to her composure.

What if she told him about the fast-approaching wedding? He cared for her, she knew it from the way he held her and touched her. If she explained how much she dreaded the marriage and how it might be avoided if he fully made love to her, he would comply, rather than lose her, wouldn't he? She gathered the nerve to tell him the truth.

But something stayed her. She didn't want him to think she'd used him all this time to serve a greater purpose. 'Twas true that was her motive when she first met him, but all they had shared had turned into so much more. She couldn't bear it if he thought poorly of her.

Better he remembered their time together fondly, once the sting of betrayal wore off. She would certainly never forget him. She only wished- nay, it was better if she didn't complete the thought. Whatever she wished for would be impossible.

When he was dressed he returned to her side, taking her hand. "Don't look so sad. Seven days is not so very long."

She tried to smile and turned her face dutifully to his as he kissed her. It was a tender kiss, his mouth gentle and soft against hers.

And then he was gone.

Falling back against the pillow, Izzy burst into tears. She'd completely failed her purpose. In just one week, she would marry Viscount Royston. Paul would be lost to her forever. And she would never feel Julian's arms around her again.

Of them all, it shouldn't have been the last that bothered her so much, but it was.

# Chapter 12

*The wedding day…*

Izzy paced back and forth in her chamber, butterflies fluttering in her stomach, trying to ignore the presence of both her mother and Belinda so she could think. They buzzed around, getting her into her bridal finery. She'd not been downstairs this morning, while the servants readied the house for her nuptials. In deference to her extreme resistance to this union, her father had granted her request for a small affair. Still, there was much to be done to ready the house for the guests arriving in only a matter of hours.

For at least the hundredth time she tried to think of any last desperate measure she might use to avoid this wedding, short of running away. She could never dishonor her father in such a way, but time was indeed her enemy, and she was caught in the cruelest of vises. Desperate times called for action. She must do something, and soon!

She'd gone to the crofter's cottage every day of the last week, hoping Julian might return early, but to no avail. She'd contemplated going into the village and finding a different man to give her virginity to, but the idea was more distasteful than ever before since she'd met Julian. It was wrong to even think about doing with a stranger all the wonderful things she'd done with him.

*Oh, Julian. Why did you have to leave?*

She tried not to think of his reaction when he went to the cottage today and she never arrived. Would he go back tomorrow? Next week? How long before he realized she would never come back?

The thought made her want to cry so she turned her attention to the more pressing issue of her impending wedding.

There was only one last drastic thing that came to mind that might see her free of this marriage and husband she didn't want. She could lie to Papa and tell him she'd lost her virtue, though it would be a lie. Just the thought of telling him such a lie made her nauseous. To be sure, he'd be furious, but he'd not allow her to suffer humiliation and gossip to follow if he thought no blood would stain the marital sheets to prove her virtue, and surely he'd wish to save her the ruin of her reputation when the viscount demanded an annulment. Wouldn't he? Despite all his gruffness, he was still her loving and doting Papa.

As Belinda brushed back a nonexistent stray hair at Izzy's temple, she chafed at the delay.

"Am I ready?"

Mama's pearl necklace rested against her neck, and Belinda straightened it. "Now you are ready."

"Oh, Isabelle. You look so beautiful." Mama's eyes welled with tears. It took everything Izzy had not to roll her own eyes at what was surely an overly emotional display.

*Why does everyone act as if this is a happy day, as if I want this marriage?* Did not speaking the truth make it easier for everyone else to bear, somehow? Or did they just not care?

"I can't believe my youngest child will be a wife in a few short

hours." Her mother sighed. "The time goes by so fast."

Lifting the hem of her gown, Izzy inched for the door, hoping to forestall the display of emotional histrionics her mother was about to unleash. "Which is why I must speak with Papa now. I'll see you both downstairs."

Belinda narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

To forestall any more comments, Izzy strode back to them, giving each a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll see you in but a short while. Fear not, I've no plans to flee."

Picking up the hem of her gown again, she did just that.

She opened the door to her father's study without bothering to knock. Papa was leaning against his desk, a drink in hand. "Isabelle!" He looked her over, his gaze fond. "How lovely you look!"

"Papa, I must speak with you, at once."

"Certainly, Izzy, just give me a moment to-"

"Nay! There's no time. I have something of great import to confess."

"Izzy-"

She gathered her courage and took a deep breath, interrupting before she lost her nerve. "I'm so sorry Papa, but I cannot go through with this marriage. I'm afraid the provisions of the betrothal contract are not met."

*Please, God, forgive me my lie. Please,* Papa*, forgive my lie!*

His smile disappeared, and in an instant his face became closed and foreboding. A muscle in his jaw jumped as wariness crept over his expression.

"Izzy, what have you done this time?" He demanded low.

"I- well, I"- the lie lodged in her throat. But was it even a complete lie? Julian had done so many wonderful and intimate things to her, certainly she couldn't be called innocent any longer, could she? He'd been inside her, after all. Her innocence was a mere technicality only because her maidenhead remained intact, but she no longer felt virgin. Certainly that counted for *something*. "There's no delicate way to say this. I'm no longer innocent, Papa. I'm so sorry. I know I should have told you before this day came, but I didn't know how."

His eyes widened and a look of utter horror and revulsion crossed his face. She rushed on to forestall the imminent explosion. "A few days ago I met a man in the village, and well…" She shrugged, unsure of what to say next. Surely she needn't go into detail, so she clenched her lips together and stood before him, head bowed, trying to look regretful and meek, all the while hating herself for making him think poorly of her, yet angry with him at the same time for forcing her to this extreme measure.

It caught her completely off guard when the back of his hand slammed against her cheek and pain erupted. She cried out and stumbled from the force of the powerful blow, catching the corner of the desk in time to prevent herself falling. With trembling fingers she touched her aching face in shock, staring at Papa in utter disbelief. In the course of her life he'd disciplined her many a time, but never before had he laid his own hand upon her in anger.

"You've gone too far this time, Isabelle! I've no doubt you did this a purpose to avoid this marriage. You've no idea of what you've

just done!" Her father's eyes blazed with fury as he took a single step toward her. She cowered beneath his wrath, in that instant knowing real fear of the man, who, until that day, had only ever made her feel safe and protected.

"I'm ashamed to call you my daughter."

Tears welled in her eyes. If only he would try to understand her feelings, her love for Paul, or even but her own desire to chart the course of her own life, he wouldn't speak to her like this.

Papa paused, studying her for a moment, his lips pressed together in a thin, angry line. "Before you entered this room your betrothed and I were discussing how headstrong you are at times. I shall leave it for him to decide if he'll still have you. But know this, Isabelle; if he will not, you've no place my house any longer. I'll not harbor a selfish, ungrateful harlot beneath my roof!"

Izzy sucked in a pained breath, overwhelmed by a yearning to take back her words and confess the truth. Before she could open her mouth to do just that, Papa spoke again.

"My lord, would you care to interview your betrothed?" He aimed the question over her head, toward the far end of the study, and the implication of that breached the jumbled turmoil of Izzy's thoughts. With a horrified gasp, she spun on her heel. Had she just made a spectacle of herself in front of her betrothed?

Dear Lord, she had! Indeed, on the other side of the room a man stood in the shadows. He faced the fireplace, his back to her, his wide shoulders stiff. He wore the clothing of a courtier. Even from where she stood she could see his black petticoat breeches were of the

finest material, while his dark red doublet bespoke wealth. His hat, with its elaborate black feather, looked ridiculous and incongruous outside the court.

She hated him on sight. Aside from holding part responsibility in this debacle of a marriage, he'd just witnessed her confession to her father and the humiliating response that followed.

She glanced back at Papa in panic.

"I tried to stop you ere you made a scene before your betrothed, Izzy, but as usual you heeded no one but yourself." He sighed heavily. "I suggest you turn those pleading eyes on Lord Royston, for I'm through with you. I have looked the other way from your selfish willfulness for too long and you've finally gone too far, bringing shame to me, to your family, and upon yourself. You are no longer welcome in this family, Isabelle."

Pain knifed through her and a sob caught in her throat. He didn't mean that, he couldn't! "Papa, nay-"

He stiffened, placed his drink on the desk, and left the study without sparing her another glance.

*What have I done?*

Fighting fear and despair so heavy it threatened to suffocate her, she closed her eyes, willing herself not to cry. This ordeal was not yet over. She heard the sound of boots against the wooden floor as her betrothed approached.

Izzy placed her hand against her throbbing cheek. The entire length of her jaw ached as if bruised. There was nothing she wanted more than to hie to the crofter's cottage to lick her wounds, for it

seemed the only safe haven where she could be completely alone with her thoughts and the pain of Papa's rejection. But there was still one more trial to face before she could run and hide. And if Papa didn't change his mind, surely Julian would help her, she was certain of it.

She took a deep breath, seeking the fortitude to face the man who might yet be her husband. When her emotions were under tight control, she opened her eyes and turned to face the fiancé she despised.

Izzy had always believed that when a swooning woman claimed the room spun before her eyes, that the woman in question was being trite and hyperbolic. But as Izzy saw her fiancé for the first time, Papa's study whirled sickeningly around her and she lurched backward.

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Ram cursed as the color faded from Izzy's face. Leaping forward, he managed to grab her by the arms in time to prevent her slumping to the floor. He guided her into an empty seat before the desk, thrust her father's abandoned drink into her hand, then stepped away. At that moment he didn't trust himself to be near her and not throttle her.

Her luminous eyes were wide with confusion and a hint of fear he found unexpectedly satisfying. She should be scared at this moment.

"Julian?"

Sweeping his hat from his head, he sketched a mockery of a bow. "Ramsay Julian James Maitland, Viscount Royston, at your

service.”

He was angrier than he’d been in his entire life.

Earlier, when Izzy barged into the study, a stunning vision in her cream-colored bridal gown, even as pride burst from within him that such a magnificent woman was soon to be his, he’d braced himself for the inevitable anger and hurt the imminent discovery of his identity would cause her. Over and over, he’d practiced what he might say to soothe her, and he’d been ready to face her.

Then she made her bold confession. Indeed, had it been any other man she’d made a cuckold, he might have been proud of her daring courage.

Despite her shocking declaration he’d turned away when her father struck her, for Ram’s first instinct was to rush to her aid and beat her father to a bloody pulp for daring to lay a hand on her. Even though she so richly deserved that blow.

As he’d stared into the fireplace trying to glean the truth, the realization he reached had been sobering. It was obvious Belinda misled him. Isabelle Beaumont was no sweet virgin. He’d thought back to a week ago, to the way she pleasured him with her mouth and her knowing hands. How could he have fooled himself into believing an innocent might know such tricks?

She’d duped him. And he was furious.

So now he found himself facing her, not caring a whit if she despised him for his deception. Despite those days spent with him in the cottage and by the river, she’d fucked another man when Ram had proved unwilling to oblige. If he was honest about the whole sordid

situation, she'd probably known many men well before him, but he had allowed lust to blind him to the truth. He cursed his gullibility in letting Belinda talk him out of what he knew from the beginning to be truth.

"I don't understand." Her face was still pale, though spots of indignation burned high on her cheek. The right side of her face bore a vivid red handprint from her father's blow and already her jaw swelled slightly, but despite that, she was stunning. He cursed himself for noticing.

"What don't you understand, Isabelle?"

"Why are *you* here?"

"I'm here to marry you. Or at least that's why I *was* here."

Her eyes widened. "*You* are Viscount Royston?" Disbelief mingled with the first hint of indignation.

"In the flesh." He watched as complete comprehension dawned.

"How long have you known who I am?" Her voice shook with anger. *Good.* He was ready for a knockdown, drag out brawl.

"Since the moment your cousin called you by your full name."

He could almost see the wheels turning in her head, calculating how he'd kept his true identity a secret from her for over three weeks. Her eyes kindled with fury.

She flung herself out of the chair and rushed at him, pushing him hard in the chest. "How dare you?"

Grabbing both her arms, he clamped them against her sides, holding her immobile. She struggled to get free, but he maintained his hold.

“How dare I? Did you just ask *me* that question? How dare *you* comport yourself the way you’ve done these last weeks when a betrothal contract was signed and witnessed in good faith?”

“By whom, you?” she snorted. “You couldn’t be bothered to come in person for the betrothal! Who are you to judge my behavior? In what way have I conducted myself that somehow gives you that right, my lord Royston?” Unsuppressed rage glittered in her eyes.

“You’ve conducted yourself like a whore, Isabelle. Like a whore.” He released her arms and thrust her away. She stumbled back, coming to rest against the desk again. “That gives me the right!” He’d be damned if he allowed her to make him feel even a moment of guilt by her accusation of neglect. Not in light of her behavior! Nor did he value himself so highly that he believed for a moment his presence at the betrothal signing would have changed her mind about extricating herself from this marriage.

She glared at him, her face now flushed with anger, her breasts heaving from the force of her fury. Even knowing what he knew now, he couldn’t help but admire how magnificent she was in a full-blown rage.

“’Tis a good thing you discovered this about me ere we were chained together in the unholy bonds of matrimony for the rest of our lives then, isn’t it, *Julian*?”

He was still going to marry her.

The irony almost sent him to his knees. He wanted nothing to do with women of his mother’s ilk, yet this one had stirred his passions to unknown heights and snuck into his affections with her

well-practiced portrayal of innocence and untouched sweetness. He'd begun to love her! So even now, knowing the truth, he would marry her, because she was like an unquenchable thirst, a hunger in his blood. Though it was madness to even consider it, he couldn't bear to deprive himself just as he was so close to having her. All the hopes kindled these last wonderful, deceitful weeks died a quick, vicious death. Now, only lust would be the foundation for his marriage to a scheming witch.

The relief in her eyes as she spat her statement made it a fait accompli. She wanted to be free of this marriage, of him, and he'd be damned if he let her walk away, congratulating herself on a game well-played, free to go back to her precious Paul. Oh no. If he had to damn himself for the rest of his life or even for all eternity, he'd make sure she was damned too.

He could never be complacent with her, as his father had been with his mother. Ram would keep a tight rein on his bride and she'd soon come to know that he alone was her master. It was the only way to gain what he wanted most.

"I think not, Isabelle."

"What do you mean?" she snapped.

"What I mean is, you'll take a few minutes to compose yourself and then you and I will leave this room together and find your father and tell him the good tidings. The wedding shall go forth as planned."

"I'll not marry you now! Are you daft?" Vehemence tinged her voice, making it shrill.

"You need to think that decision my dear. There's a quite legal

contract signed that states otherwise".

"But everything has changed now!" Her composure slipped a notch. "Contracts are broken all the time! I don't want to marry you."

"Think you I care even a whit? The reasons upon which this match was conceived still exist. My father needs the political connections and royal goodwill marriage to you will bring. You'll marry me, Isabelle, or your father will lose his precious land and all the money my father agreed to pay for you. Frankly, you should be grateful. Your father is getting the better end of this bargain."

She gasped. "That's blackmail!"

"It isn't blackmail to hold you to a contract legally signed and witnessed. Besides, you've no other choice. If you don't marry me, where will you go? Have you so quickly forgotten your father's last words to you? Your family will no longer have you, Isabelle. Indeed, you're lucky I will. Truthfully, you should be on your knees *begging* me to marry you!"

The words halted her and he watched with savage satisfaction as a wave of pain crossed her face.

"You've no other choice, Isabelle."

"Stop calling me that! My name is Izzy!"

There was a sharp stab of pain in the general vicinity of his heart. Izzy would forever be the sweet girl on the riverbank, the innocent who'd entrusted her body to him, the woman for whom he yearned in the deepest, darkest hours of the night. Not this hissing, spitting she-cat.

"Your time is up *Isabelle*. What's your decision?"

# Chapter 13

Izzy's gut churned with nausea.

How had everything spun so completely out of control? Izzy stared in stupefied silence at the man before her, panic rising steadily in her chest that made breathing difficult.

*What should I do?*

How could he still want to marry when he was so very angry? And rightly so, if she were honest with herself, especially after he'd overheard the confession to her father, though surely he would recognize the desperate lie when he calmed. She was furious with him, too, and justified in her anger over his deception, but she was not so much of a hypocrite she didn't recognize his right to be furious as well.

But where had the tenderness Julian displayed so often gone? If he would just show her the smallest hint of it now, she'd take his hand and willingly do as he and her father wished. In light of Papa's threat, she had no other choice. She was terrified of losing Papa's love, losing her family. Perhaps if she went through with the wedding Papa would find it in his heart to forgive her.

And yet, despite her intimate knowledge of his body, the man before her was a complete stranger. He was Julian, yet he wasn't. This man possessed the bearing of nobility. From his aquiline nose down to his expensive cavalier boots, he reeked of self-confidence and authority. And she liked it not one bit.

Anger at his deception overrode common sense. “I’ll see you in He-”

“*Don’t* say it, Isabelle. You’re mere seconds away from becoming a homeless street urchin with nothing to her name. Though I think it’s safe to say you’ll make one hell of a courtesan should that come to pass.”

His words were like tiny daggers stabbing at her heart.

It hurt that he thought so lowly of her and it hurt that Papa had cast her out as he had.

*Will Papa truly stand by his words if I don’t go through with this madness?*

She wasn’t sure. One of her brothers would take her in, surely they’d never leave her homeless, would they? But if she didn’t marry the Viscount, her brothers would lose so much. Perhaps they’d be too angry to want to help her.

But dear God! To go forth with a marriage this way seemed a recipe for disaster. Could she overcome her anger over his deception? Would he overcome his fury over hers?

She’d have to find out, for there was no other choice. Paul was lost to her now, whether she married the viscount or not. Backing out of marriage on her wedding day and the shame of being disowned by her family would destroy her reputation. No one would have her now. She’d made this bed for herself, now it was time to lie in it. She only hoped that later tonight, after the vows were exchanged, she and Julian—Ramsay—could have an open, honest discussion, and smooth away all the misunderstandings between them. She had only make it

through the day and then everything would be all right. Bridegrooms had to treat their new brides with tenderness and patience on their first night as husband and wife. She would make everything right tonight. She'd confess her lie, explain why she misled her father, and perhaps they might even laugh about it. And then he'd hold her in his arms like he had in the crofter's cottage and make her feel safe and cherished. Though she'd die before admitting it to anyone else at this precise moment, nothing about this marriage seemed so terrible on second thought. Once he knew the truth they would begin anew.

She'd grieve in private for the life she wouldn't have with Paul.

Swallowing her fear, she raised her eyes to Ramsay's and nodded. Perhaps once they wed he'd soften and cease his mockery.

"Wise choice, Isabelle. Shall we find your father and share our joyous tidings?"

She bit her lip, praying she hadn't just made the worst mistake of her life.

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It all happened so fast it couldn't possibly be real! But the unfamiliar weight of the wedding band on Izzy's ring finger brought everything into sharp focus. *I'm married!*

The realization brought no surge of exhilaration, dismay, or even fear. There was only a kind of numb acceptance. *How peculiar.*

When she and Ram left the study together, Papa had accepted the announcement of their impending nuptials with some surprise and a great amount of relief. It hurt her terribly that he was so eager to give her away. Yet despite her capitulation to his wishes, he'd not

spared her a single tender glance and she'd ached at his neglect. She yearned for just one smile from him, one kindly spoken word- anything that would set her mind at ease that she hadn't lost his love forever. More than anything, she'd wished to confess her deceit to him before the nuptials, but whenever she drew near his face became closed and forbidding.

When the time came for the wedding to begin, Izzy had discovered Papa no longer wanted the honor of giving her to Ram. She'd never, ever imagined her wedding without Papa, but he no longer wanted her. And he couldn't even be bothered to be the one to hand her off to the next man who didn't truly want her. Anguish had snatched her breath, her bottom lip trembled, and it had taken every ounce of willpower she possessed to hold back desperate tears before an assembly of wedding guests.

It had fallen to Tyrone, her eldest brother, to place her hand in Ram's in their father's stead. Surely it was the least auspicious beginning to any wedding, ever, for her father was ashamed of her and her groom seemed to despise her. Izzy was almost in tears before the ceremony even started.

As her brother gave her to her future husband, she'd searched Ramsay's eyes, seeking any sign of tenderness. Instead, she'd seen only steely resolve when he took her arm and turned to the vicar.

Mrs. Smith had attended wearing a smug smile as if she'd played a hand in the day's events. If only the vicar's wife knew all that occurred since that day in the study when she'd wielded the switch, the woman would probably keel over in a dead faint.

Izzy had repeated the words required of her, barely aware of what she'd said, only noting the mocking look in Ram's eyes as she vowed to be faithful unto him.

Then he'd slipped a ring onto her finger and followed it with a chaste kiss.

Now they were man and wife, and it was time to face her third ordeal of the day.

They greeted the guests as a newly married couple, accepting the congratulations and best wishes from the small gathering. In a blur, Izzy met Ram's father, the Earl, and Juliana, Ram's young sister. Izzy barely had time to form an opinion of the pretty girl before her mother and then Belinda descended upon her. Her cousin threw her arms around Izzy's neck, hugging her close.

"Congratulations, Izzy. You're the most beautiful bride ever."

Izzy's composure slipped and she struggled not to burst into tears. Hugging Belinda back, Izzy held onto her as though her cousin was her only security in the world. As much as she wanted to, Izzy couldn't unburden herself to her cousin, for Belinda would only fret. There was no reason to upset her when Izzy could very well worry enough for the both of them.

"Come." Ramsay took her arm in a tight grasp. "'Tis time to go to the house for the *festive* meal".

She couldn't bear his cutting sarcasm.

Surely, she was only in the grip of a terrible nightmare, one she couldn't awaken from no matter how she tried, but a nightmare nonetheless and therefore destined to end? After all, they couldn't go

on like this forever.

And yet, she wasn't buoyed by hope. She was married to a man whom, by all indication, despised her, and now they were to celebrate their sham of a marriage before a roomful of people, pretending happiness at their union.

Ramsay set a fast pace as they walked to the house. Trying her best to keep up, she stumbled, but he merely tightened his hold and dragged her along behind him, like a recalcitrant child about to receive a chastisement. She bit back a plea for mercy, knowing he had none to spare. Her spirits sank even lower, when she didn't believe it possible to feel worse than she already did. The fact that she was now his wife hadn't changed a thing. By the time they reached the manor, Izzy was panting from exertion.

Her mother had overseen the preparation of an intimate reception, with delicious food and other luxuries provided to all, but everything Izzy put in her mouth tasted like sawdust and so she finally gave up trying to eat. Worry over how she would break through Ramsay's anger long enough to explain the truth when they retired to Chesworth House gnawed at her. His father, the Earl, was leaving for London with Juliana in order to give Ram and Izzy a few weeks of privacy. The idea of being alone with her new husband in a strange house almost sent her into hysterics.

When the meal finished, Ramsay left his place at the table without a word, apparently not willing to even pay lip service to the usual wedding traditions. When Izzy next caught sight of him he stood across the room talking with Tyrone. Izzy watched as they conversed

with ease, saw Ramsay smile at something her brother said, and experienced a pang of true dismay. If only he'd smile at her like that just once, she would know some relief, at least. As it was, he'd not bothered to spare a single look in her direction. She was a bride abandoned by her groom at her own wedding. She stared straight ahead, pretending not to notice, fighting an overwhelming urge to flee.

Suddenly aware of a presence, Izzy turned to find Belinda hovering nearby, her eyes searching.

"Are you well, Izzy?"

Izzy forced a smile. "I'm fine," she lied.

Her cousin sighed with relief and took the seat vacated by Ramsay earlier. "So you weren't furious when you discovered that Julian is really your viscount?"

Izzy gasped. Surely she hadn't heard Belinda correctly! "You knew?"

Belinda's eyes widened in alarm and she stuttered, "I-I assumed he told you when he revealed the truth to you."

Belinda's betrayal, and it *was* a betrayal, on top of everything else Izzy had suffered that day nearly broke her. Her hands began to shake, and then her arms, until she trembled from head to toe. "You knew who he was all this time and you didn't tell me?" Izzy heard the rising pitch of her own voice and clamped her mouth shut, afraid she would open it, and nothing but a scream would emerge. This all could have so easily been avoided if only Belinda had told her the truth! "You deliberately let me make a fool of myself?"

"I-I promised him I wouldn't disclose his identity to you."

Izzy narrowed her eyes. "And a promise to him was worth more than a lifetime of friendship?"

"I truly thought it for the best. You seemed to like Julian so well. I couldn't help but feel that when you discovered the truth you'd be well pleased, regardless of your feelings for Paul."

Izzy tried to gain hold of her spiraling anger, but it was too much on top of the day's other revelations. "Tell me, Belinda, how long have you wanted Paul for yourself? Or is it only that you couldn't stand it that two men wanted to marry me, when you have no prospects of your own? For I can see no other reason why you betrayed me and sabotaged my only chance at happiness!"

Belinda's face paled and her eyes filled with tears. "You think I did this on purpose to hurt you? Do you truly believe that?" she cried.

Izzy stared back in stony silence.

"Everything I've ever done has been for you, Izzy. Everything. My entire life I've put your needs ahead of my own so you might be happy. And you truly think me capable of such vile deception for my own selfish purposes? Do you?"

When Izzy didn't answer, Belinda stood. "You could be happy with Ramsay if you tried. Do you know how lucky you are that you desired one another ere either of you knew you were even betrothed? If you can't find happiness under those circumstances you'll never find happiness, and you'll have no one to blame but yourself."

Belinda pushed her chair violently from the table. "From now on I'm putting my own needs first. It's now your husband's

responsibility to make sacrifices for your happiness, not mine. I only hope you show him more gratitude than you've shown me."

Izzy turned away so Belinda wouldn't see her tears. She wanted to take back her words, for they were cruel and untrue, but if she tried to speak she'd lose her composure completely. To the two people she loved most, Papa and Belinda, she'd been an unwanted burden and never knew it. And now, for reasons she didn't understand, she'd become Ramsay's unwanted burden. Only Izzy held no delusions her husband would ever worry unduly about her happiness, let alone sacrifice for it.

She flinched when she heard the rustle of Belinda's skirts as she stalked away.

Deep seated loneliness and grief pierced her. Her father was ashamed of her, Belinda had betrayed her, and her husband despised her.

And somehow, though her intention was never to hurt anyone, she'd brought it all on herself. That simple truth made it all the harder to bear. She had no right to self-pity.

Could there be anything worse than this?

***

Worse arrived not long after Izzy's argument with Belinda, when Ramsay finally returned to her side, only to take her arm in a ruthless grip, signaling the end of one ordeal and the beginning of another. To the casual observer it might have seemed only the possessive touch of a newly married man with his wife, but Izzy could feel the anger bubbling barely below the surface in the bite of his

fingers into her skin. She tried to pull away but he hissed through clenched teeth low enough so only she could hear, “be still” in an authoritative voice. Then, he turned to the few guests who still milled about and smiled.

“I think the time has come for us to make our way to Chesworth House. My bride has had a long day and it grows late. Thank you for sharing this day with us. We must leave, but please, I urge you to remain and enjoy yourselves.”

No one protested, and of course, why would they? All they saw was a groom anxious to be alone with his bride. Ramsay hauled her from the hall and toward the front door, where a carriage waited to take them to his nearby home. He didn’t even offer her a chance to bid her family farewell. Izzy resisted an urge to throw a panicked glance toward Belinda.

Only her mother rushed to the door to see them off, giving Izzy a gentle hug and a stroke to her cheek. “Be well, my love.”

Izzy forced a smile. Then the door closed behind them and her new husband was handing her into the waiting carriage, making no effort to hide his impatience.

As the vehicle bore them through the darkness, down the long driveway, away from the familiarity of her home and loved ones, Izzy gathered her courage to challenge Ramsay and then turned to him, making sure to catch his gaze with her own. There were but minutes until the carriage reached Chesworth house, Izzy’s new home. If they were to salvage anything from this day and find peace with one another, it must be now, before they arrived at Ramsay’s home where

he'd have all the advantage and she'd resent him for it. Surely he wanted to make this marriage work, didn't he?

The object of her musings faced her in stony silence, his grey eyes smoldering in the dim light cast by the sole lantern in the carriage. As the wheels went over a rut the lantern swung gently, casting Ram's shadow upon the vehicles door beside him. It looked huge and intimidating, even a little menacing, much like the man who'd cast the shade.

"M-may we talk, my lord?"

He inclined his head in the age-old symbol of permission.

"As it is our wedding day I thought perhaps you might indulge me"-

His eyes widened in disbelief and a harsh laugh exploded from his lips. "I will *never* be indulgent with you, Isabelle. Don't make the mistake of thinking you can ever manipulate me the way you've manipulated everyone else in your life. I'm not a fool and your life will be far more tolerable if you accept that truth now."

Izzy recoiled at the vehemence in his voice. The beat of her heart increased to a staccato pace.

She swallowed, then tried again. "I-I only want you to know the truth ere this marriage begins on the wrong foot." As if that time hadn't come and gone hours past! She watched his face for any sign of reaction, but there was none. He may as well have worn a mask, for all that his thoughts and feelings were hidden behind a façade of stone.

"Julian, I've never lain with a man," she blurted. "Until I met

you I'd never done more than exchange a few kisses. I swear there was no one, not this past se'nnight, and not before you. I'm a virgin still. I lied to my father because I was desperate to avoid marriage. I thought"- She realized she was wringing her hands in her lap and forced them to relax. "I thought my father would protect me." Her voice came out as an unintended whisper, as just thinking about how wrong she'd been about Papa hurt so very much.

A muscle jumped in his cheek. He turned away, staring through the window into the darkness without. She waited for him to acknowledge her confession, but he didn't speak or even nod his head to indicate he'd heard her words.

He didn't say a word at all. The only sound in the carriage was that of the hooves of the horses and the squeaks of the wheels that jostled them upon the road ever faster to Chesworth House.

Panic engulfed her as the carriage slowed. This wasn't how the night was supposed to be! Ramsay should have listened to her confession, perhaps even chastised her for lying to Papa, but in the end he was supposed to apologize for the charade he'd played and by doing so extend an olive branch she'd gladly take. They were supposed to laugh over this misunderstanding, perhaps as they shared a drink before bed. He wasn't supposed to ignore her confession as if she hadn't spoken. What kind of marriage could they possibly hope to have if they spent their first night as a wedded couple bitter and angry? She had to find a way to make him understand!

But the carriage came to a stop without another word spoken by either of them. Through the window, Izzy saw an imposing manor

house, her new home, but her despondency was so great she couldn't bring herself to even be interested, let alone excited. In silence, Ramsay leapt from the carriage and then helped her down from the high perch. If any of the servants were watching, they'd think Ramsay the most polite of bridegrooms. Izzy might have been able to pretend as well but for the tight grasp he once more took on her arm. Surely she'd have marks from his fingers forever embedded on her flesh as a result of this day.

A butler wearing a grin opened the massive oak door before they'd ascended the five stone steps, but the smile faded the moment he looked at Ramsay and any greeting he'd prepared died on his lips. Instead he simply nodded and held the door ajar as Ramsay led her into a richly furnished foyer of dark green and golden hues. The marble beneath her feet was the finest cut Italianate with delicate gold veining, the tapestries on the wall expertly woven, yet faded from years of wear. The cool polish of her new home seemed a perfect fit for her new husband, a man who didn't resemble in the least the exciting, easygoing man she'd become so closely acquainted with these past weeks. The rustic warmth she'd known with Julian in the humble cottage would never fit into these surroundings.

The thought filled Izzy with sorrow and her throat clogged with tears. That Julian had never truly existed, and that she'd never see him again was suddenly more than she could bear, especially since the only thing she wanted was to see a small hint of Julian in her husband. She stared at her feet, fighting the desperate need to cry.

Ramsay didn't introduce her to the butler. Propriety was hardly

on his mind, which was made all too apparent when he motioned her to precede him up the stairs with naught but a jerk of the head. Izzy had never been in this house before, but the servants at Rendstell would have sent on her belongings earlier in the day. She assumed he was taking her to what would be her bedchamber. As she stiffly ascended the stairs she couldn't help wonder if this was how the regicides felt on their way to the gallows at the behest of the newly restored king.

Izzy breathed deeply, forcing herself to remain calm and think rationally about what was to come. Whether he took her to a bedchamber of her own or to his chamber, she need not fear unduly. Even though he was furious, even though he wasn't Julian, this man had always been patient and tender with her in previous relations of this sort. 'Twas normal to feel trepidation on one's wedding night, for she was a virgin, but more than uncertainty of the unknown, she had nothing to fear. And perhaps once they were alone, together, Ramsay would be in a more amenable mood and they could talk about her false confession and laugh about it. Surely they'd have to speak at some time. Ramsay wouldn't want to make love to her while he was so angry, would he? If they were to consummate the marriage this night, surely they must find common ground first. Or perhaps he was so angry he wouldn't want to consummate their union this night.

She wasn't sure which option she preferred, but finally, Izzy began to relax. Either way, there was nothing to fear overmuch.

Before they climbed even a third of the way Ramsay's fingers tightened around her arm and he dragged her to a sudden halt. She

turned to him in confusion, but he wasn't looking at her.

"Hawthorne!"

The butler reappeared instantly in the foyer below, ready to please. "Aye, my lord?"

"We are not to be disturbed under *any* circumstance. No matter what you hear from my chamber, we are to be left alone. Is that understood?"

"Of course, my lord."

Izzy went cold with terror.

***

Ram had waited for this night for one very long month, and while he was now saddled with a faithless bride, he'd at least get his full enjoyment on her. The thought almost amused him. Who could have imagined there'd ever be a silver lining when it came to having a whore for wife?

Though he'd pretended otherwise, he'd been aware of Izzy every moment of the day. Her coldness had been expected after the events in the baron's study. But the haughty little bitch had spent the entire day in a sulk, rebuffing both her father and Belinda, too, presumably for the part each had played in the hellish farce that had culminated with the wedding. No doubt not getting her way for once had pricked her spoiled pride and mauled her shallow dignity.

'Twas obvious now she thought to manipulate him in order to gain the upper hand, hence the sudden portrayal as a shy, frightened bride. He snorted as he thought about her earlier request, that he *indulge* her, of all things. As if a lifetime of pampering and indulgence

hadn't already caused enough damage, hadn't led her to believe she could behave any way she pleased without consequences. God, she was a consummate liar.

His heart twisted. Everything she'd done today was proof that the Izzy who had enchanted him these last weeks with her sweetness and innocent eagerness never existed. It had all been naught but a big lie. He'd fallen for a girl who wasn't real, and the loss of the bright future he'd envisioned made him want to punish her, hurt her, for making him want something he didn't even know he wanted, and now never would. Damn her! To come so close, only to discover in the eleventh hour that he could have her, but never the way he'd wanted her. Legally, he now possessed her body, but she would give him nothing more of herself and the marriage he'd looked so forward to would be empty. And he wouldn't even be the only man to have possessed her body. The unmitigated gall it took for her to try to convince him she was a virgin after her outrageous behavior in the cottage, infuriated him.

Even still, misplaced hope forced him to consider her words. Could there be *any* truth to her claim? Was it possible she'd dallied with other men, yet kept the ultimate prize out of reach all this time? Noblewomen were clever and devious and used to getting what they wanted, all the while remaining within the bounds of propriety, even if they sometimes pushed at the very boundaries. They excelled at it. Was it possible she spoke true?

Nay. That was only wishful thinking. He need only recollect the afternoon weeks ago, when he'd almost lost control, when he

pleasured her with his cock. Not once did she try to stop him or simply warn him she was a maiden. There wasn't even an attempt on her part to be coy. Nay, she'd been so eager to fuck, she'd practically begged for it. Her repertoire included tricks that could impress even the most jaded of whores and courtesans. No innocent maid could know the things she did, it wasn't possible. A potent combination of love and lust blinded him to the truth, but now it was all so glaringly obvious she played him for a fool. And she'd compounded it by blatantly lying to him in the carriage.

Did she think him an utter dupe? No matter what tricks she planned, did she really believe she could convince him she was virgin? Would she pretend shyness, or cry frightened crocodile tears, or cut her finger while he slept and leave blood on the sheets? As if he couldn't tell the difference between a virgin and a woman of experience!

Fury, kept at a simmer throughout the course of the long day, now boiled over. She'd soon learn that she didn't own even the smallest control over him. She would *never* twist him around her finger as she did everyone else. If he had to break her pride and her very spirit to make her grasp that truth, then so be it.

The object of his musings remained silent until he thrust her into his bedchamber and locked the door behind him. He laid the key on top of a tall wardrobe, far too high for her to reach.

"Julian, please, you must listen to me," Izzy cried the moment he faced her.

"Ramsay." He bit out. "My name is Ramsay. You may call me

Ram. Or husband. Or better yet, Master. But do *not* call me Julian."

She recoiled, putting more distance between them.

He removed his shirt, throwing it to the floor with no care for its condition. Izzy's eyes widened in alarm.

"Jul- Ramsay, we must talk."

He pulled off one black boot. "There's been enough talk. What I'm interested in need not involve talking at all."

She pressed herself against the wall, her face a mask of misery. But her theatrics would not sway him. She was an expert actress, he'd learned that firsthand.

His other boot landed with a thud beside the first. "You'd best get that gown off if you don't want it torn from you."

She gasped at the threat but made no move to comply.

He reached for the waistband of his breeches and began to peel them down.

A strangled cry escaped her and she flung out a hand in appeal. "Please. I don't want our marriage to start this way! Please don't do this. We'll both regret it!"

He straightened, then paused, leaving his breeches open, sitting low on his hips. "In what way would that be, Isabelle? You don't want to begin this marriage with deception? With lies? As a woman of loose morals? It's too late for that! You weren't worrying about the start of our marriage when you were out cavorting with any man you found! Perhaps I could have overlooked what you did before our betrothal, but tell me, Isabelle, just how many men did you fuck *after* we were betrothed?"

Her face paled but she didn't flinch beneath his glower. He had to give her credit; she was a force to reckon with and she certainly didn't cow easily.

That would soon change.

She pushed herself off the wall, taking a step toward him. "If you feel so strongly about this, about me, my God, *why* did you go through with this?" She gestured with one hand between them.

Why indeed? He could barely explain it to himself, let alone to his new bride. But she would *never* know that. "It was my duty to uphold the betrothal and wed you because *I* respect my father and this is what he wanted. And, as I'm over the age of thirty I have need of an heir. I may as well beget one on you." He ran his fingers through his hair, frustration gnawing at him. "You might be more devious than Eve, but you're pleasing enough to look upon. It should be no hardship to plough your field."

Anger sparked in her eyes, turning them a deep blue shade. She stalked toward him, fury evident in every step. "I am not your brood mare!"

"You will be anything I say you'll be!" he snarled, finally pushed to the breaking point. "You will be an obedient wife. You will submit your body *only* to me until you have quickened with my babe, at which time I'll leave you to seek my pleasures elsewhere. Until then you'll not leave this house unescorted, for I'll not give you the chance to cuckold me beneath my very nose. Any child you give birth to, Isabelle, will be without a doubt *mine*!"

"You bastard!" The sharp sound of a slap echoed through the

room as the flat of her hand landed against his cheek.

He grasped her wrist and wrenched it but she didn't so much as flinch. "If you *ever* do that again I'll take a switch to you, so help me."

She snorted. "It wouldn't be the first time I suffered the switch on account of you! How do you think I was coerced into agreeing to this sham of a marriage in the first place?"

He narrowed his eyes, weighing her words for truth. It rankled that the thought of marriage to him had so appalled her it had taken a whipping for her to assent.

"Be that as it may, we are married, which means I *own* you now. I *control* everything about your life. You can do nothing without my permission and anything you need or want depends solely upon my good will, so it might behoove you to resign yourself to finding a way to please me. And Izzy, you *will* obey me. You'll not leave this house alone until you are delivered of my heir, do I make myself clear?"

"You cannot treat me like this! I'll not be a prisoner in my own home! I told you I am still a virgin. I haven't *cavorted* with anyone but you. Why won't you listen to me? I have no need to lie, for you'll soon find out the truth for yourself, won't you?"

"You think I'm ignorant of the tricks whores play to make a man think he's the first?" He grunted in disbelief. "You must know why I don't believe you, Isabelle. The woman who had my cock in her mouth barely a se'nnight ago was no innocent virgin. I've had courtesans who couldn't hold a candle to your skills, my sweet."

Her hand slammed against his cheek again and the control he'd

held onto by the thinnest of thread snapped. He grasped her wrist, ruthlessly twisting her arm behind her back, then dragged her against him and lowered his head so they were nose to nose.

"I warned you not to ever do that again." By God, he'd hear her apology or he would take that switch to her, wedding day or not.

She stared in mutinous silence, her eyes sparking with rage.

"You'll pay for that," he promised.

She spit in his face. For a moment he stood utterly still, stunned. Pushed finally beyond his breaking point, he unleashed the full force of the fury boiling within him. Letting go of her wrist, he wiped his face, then burrowed his fingers into her hair, grabbing her forcefully by a large hank. She winced but didn't utter a sound. It only infuriated him all the more that he couldn't intimidate her into submission. He was angrier than he'd ever been in his entire life and she didn't care a whit.

He dragged her toward the bed. The faster he consummated this union the faster he could retreat to his study. As for Izzy, a night and day spent locked alone in her chamber with no one to fawn upon her wouldn't go amiss. She'd soon thoroughly learn that repercussions would follow her actions.

As realization of his intent dawned on her she finally lost her composure and fought against him. She clawed at his arm, but he didn't halt, unperturbed by the attack.

When he reached the dais upon which his bed sat he lifted her off her feet and tossed her onto the mattress. She immediately got to her knees to spring from it, but he pinned her down with the weight

of his body atop hers, holding her immobile. She squirmed beneath him, then aimed a kick at his groin, but he clamped his legs over hers, at the same time freeing his hands. He grasped her delicate beaded gown by the neckline and tore. The sound of rending fabric filled the room. Her eyes widened and filled with panic.

"Nay! Nay, you can't do this. *Please*, Julian! Please, don't." Desperation laced her voice, making it shrill, and satisfaction surged in his veins. He'd *finally* got a reaction from her other than haughty anger.

He pulled the torn edges of her gown apart and reached for her petticoats, ripping them with the same savagery with which he tore the gown. "My. Name. Is. Ramsay."

She closed her eyes. Her throat worked as she swallowed rapidly. "Ramsay, please, I-I don't want this. Not like this. You're truly frightening me. If we could just talk"-

Her silky undergarments were no barrier to his ravaging hands. He shifted off her long enough to tug the ruined bridal clothing from beneath her.

"What's to be frightened of? You know what to expect. Not once in all the times we were together did you show maidenly timidity or fear. And we both know why." He tossed her garments from the bed. "This marriage *will* be consummated tonight. I've waited too long to have you and the wait has come to an end. You can fight me or you can yield to me and participate, I care not which," he lied, "but this will not remain a marriage in name only beyond the next hour."

He tried taking her lips with his. Despite his anger, if he could coax her into a giving mood the night could still be pleasurable for the both of them and something might be salvaged of the miserable day. She turned her face away, clearly rejecting him, which only enraged him all the more. Fine. If she wanted no tenderness, he certainly wasn't going to waste his time convincing her. She could play the martyr if she so desired, it made no bloody difference.

He didn't try to kiss her again; instead, he bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. When she moaned low in her throat a primal surge of satisfaction sparked in him.

Now here was the Izzy he knew, the wanton who responded to his touch and his tongue. His seeking hand slid between her thighs. She clawed at him and clamped her legs shut in response, but he pried them open easily with his own legs. With one hand he grabbed both of her wrists and held them pinned above her head, then returned to finding the treasure he sought with the other.

He was somewhat surprised to find her dry to the touch, but as he ran the pad of his finger through her folds, hot moisture seeped from her.

She could try to act as cold as she wished, but he knew exactly how to warm her.

He released her to remove his breeches. As soon as he shifted his weight from her she scrambled to the other side of the bed, launching herself from it. He shed his breeches and then, fully nude, stalked her across the bedchamber.

Izzy stood quivering against the door, using her arms to cover

her nudity, and for a moment she looked small and truly terrified. Ram tamped down the urge to take her in his arms and offer comfort. But she didn't deserve his comfort after what she'd done. Moreover, he'd be damned if he crawled to her and set the precedent for this marriage. If she wanted peace, she'd have to come to him in willing surrender.

She crept toward the wardrobe and stood on tiptoe, trying in vain to reach the key.

"You'll not reach it. That door remains locked until this marriage is consummated. How long that might take depends upon you."

"We'll be locked in here through eternity if you await my consent" she spat.

"I neither seek, nor require your consent, *wife*." With those words, he charged. She tried to duck around him but he grabbed her around the waist, swinging her into his arms. He bore her, struggling, to the bed and dumped her on it unceremoniously, once again pinning her beneath his weight.

"Now where were we?" He slid his hand between her legs. "Ah yes. We were right"-he flicked her hidden bud with his finger and she arched against him with a gasp. "Here." Perhaps she hated him in this moment, but her body yearned for his. At least that wasn't all a lie. Moisture coated his finger heavier than before.

She was ready enough and he was done waiting. Frankly, it had ceased to be possible to wait any longer. It seemed like he'd wanted this woman for a lifetime and now she was in his bed, his bride, ripe

for the taking. His.

He shifted between her legs, grasped his cock, and positioned himself at the entrance to her lush body. The motion revived her will to fight as she realized the moment was upon them. She pushed against his chest, but it was far too late. Nothing would stop him from his purpose now.

Grabbing her hands to still her struggles, he yanked her arms against her sides, then thrust deep.

Her harsh, pain-filled cry penetrated his mind at the same moment he felt the resistant barrier tear as he buried himself inside her.

He went utterly still.

*Nay!*

He recoiled in stunned horror and reared back to look down at her face.

*Nay! Nay! Nay!*

The single word repeated in his head as the full realization of what he'd done washed over him.

He stared at Izzy's pale face, perhaps truly seeing her for the first time that day. Words failed him.

*What the hell have I done?*

As he absorbed in shock what had just happened, he dropped his head to the pillow beside hers and held motionless. He pressed his cheek to hers, overwhelmed by remorse so heavy it almost choked him.

The moisture of a tear landed against his. It scalded him, or

maybe it was only his shame that burned him so. He forced himself to raise his head and look at her again.

Her eyes were clenched shut, but that didn't stop tears creeping from the corners. Her face was ashen, her lips pinched in agony. Her hands were fisted so tightly the whites of her knuckles showed.

He was undone.

Obviously, there was no way to recover; she would find no pleasure in this encounter no matter what he did. He withdrew immediately, but remained above her, leaning his weight on his arms, trying desperately to think of a way to comfort her.

"Izzy. Izzy, shh. You're all right now." He wiped away her tears with a fingertip, then stroked the hair back from her face. "I'm so sorry, Sweetheart," he whispered, agonized for her.

She opened tortured eyes. "It hurts." She whimpered in a broken voice.

"Shh. I know. 'Tis over now and the pain will soon pass. Relax, Sweetheart." He feathered kisses across her cheeks, her nose, her forehead, then finally brushed over her lips, hoping the light touch would soothe her.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, though it was only a matter of minutes, her tension slowly eased. Her hands loosened against the sheets and color returned to her face. But the moment he shifted his weight she went rigid again. He immediately moved onto his side next to her, giving her space.

"Relax, Sweetheart. The worst has passed, I promise."

More than anything, he wanted to comfort her, but he had no

idea where to even start. She turned on her side facing away from him, curling herself into a tight ball. Her body shook with the force of her sobs, though she didn't make a sound.

As he stared at her slender back and her shaking shoulders, his heart bled for her and for all she'd been through during the long course of the day, all because of a false confession she made to her father. Now that the veil of anger that had clouded everything lifted he reconsidered the scene in the baron's study. What was it she'd said, exactly?

*"I'm no longer innocent."*

He closed his eyes. She hadn't truly lied, had she? Perhaps in the most technical sense only. She'd but stretched the truth. Aye, she wanted her father to think the worst, but she never claimed not to be virgin. And arguably, after the time they shared in the crofter's hut, she truly wasn't innocent. Why hadn't he recognized the significance of her choice of words sooner?

He cursed, looking back at everything through what he now knew. It wasn't haughty aloofness with which she surrounded herself all day. She'd been quite frankly overwhelmed by everything she'd been through; the confrontation with her father, then with him, discovering his true identity and the charade he'd played, her father's rejection, her cousin's knowledge, his fury and insistence they still wed, her fear of the unknown and the natural apprehension of a girl leaving the comfort of her beloved family and home. She'd spent her wedding day abandoned, alone, and scared. He ached for her, for everything she'd gone through.

He ached for himself, too. For so long he'd yearned for the moment he could finally make her his, both in marriage and in his bed. He'd envisioned passion and laughter and tenderness. But he'd not heard her hot cries of pleasure, nor felt her shudder around him in sweet ecstasy the way he always knew she would.

Instead, anger and jealousy had turned him into a man he didn't recognize; a bitter, ruthless violator. Izzy deserved to be gently loved and cherished and instead he'd taken her as though she was a common streetwalker. He ravished his own wife.

He stared at the bright smear of blood standing out in stark contrast against the pale sheets, proclaiming in vivid color what he'd done, then shut his eyes against the sight.

Why hadn't she simply resorted to that most efficient of all female theatrics? Her tears would have stopped him, even in all his fury. A weeping woman was hardly conducive to lovemaking after all. Hell, she'd have been well within her right to cry, given the situation, so why hadn't she?

*Pride*. Of course. Everything else was stripped from her during the course of the day; pride was all she had left. Pride had dictated she fight him, to make him believe the truth before the marriage began. She hadn't even truly rejected him, she'd only wanted him to listen first and believe her…

He put a halt to his train of thoughts. It certainly wasn't Izzy's fault he did this to her, to them. After what she declared in the Baron's study, he wasn't wrong to doubt her, but once he decided to marry her despite everything else, she'd deserved the respect of a new

bride.

Helplessness consumed him. What could he do for her? He wanted to hold her, but he knew she'd reject his touch. Seeking to comfort in some small way, he laid his hand on her shoulder, but she flinched away.

"Sweetheart, what can I do to help?"

"You can go to the devil!"

His heart broke when she answered him in such an Izzy-like way.

And then she whispered, "I miss Julian" in a voice so low he almost missed it.

He turned away, trying to gain control over the lump that rose in his throat. When he thought about the awful way their marriage began, he had to fight the urge to sob himself. He now had the greatest of all uphill battles to fight if he wanted this marriage to succeed.

He would prevail and make this right for her if it was the last thing he ever did.

# Chapter 14

There was nothing Ram, or Julian, or whatever his name was, could ever do to make things right between them, ever again. It was too late. The tenderness she'd yearned to see from him had come too late.

Izzy remained on her side facing away from Ram, letting her tears run their course. Her body was sensitive and sore and she was so very tired. The long day had brought nothing but misery and she only wanted it to end.

This marriage was a match made in hell. She clung to the only thought that lent her any hope at all. *There must be a way to undo this dreadful mistake. Surely, Papa would help her when he learned of what Ram did! Papa* must *help!*

She heard the sounds of Ram moving around the room and knew he'd approached the bed again. He squatted, so he was on eye level with her, and held up a white washcloth. White flag of surrender, or a new form of torture?

When he reached for her she flinched away. He pulled his hand back.

"Izzy, you need tending."

She read the remorse in his gaze but it had no impact on her raw feelings. Where was his understanding and concern only a few minutes before? She flipped her hair back from her face.

"I don't need anything from you."

“Perhaps not, but I need to do this for you.” He lowered himself onto the bed beside her and wiped the damp cloth across her face, erasing the stiff trail of dried tears, his touch so gentle and nothing at all like the way he’d handled her all day.

“Oh, Izzy. How have things come to such a pass with us?”

She didn’t answer, wouldn’t allow him to sway her by the sincerity in his voice. Instead, she watched warily as the hand holding the washcloth dipped down to her thighs- and she saw the blood.

She pressed her legs closer together. “W-what are you doing?”

His breath released in a hiss, as though he’d been holding it. “I want to make sure I didn’t hurt you.”

“You did hurt me.”

His eyes closed for the a brief moment, then opened them and sought her gaze again. “I know, Sweetheart, and I’m so sorry for that. I was rougher than I would have been had I known,” he blew out a breath. “I was much rougher with you than I ought to have been under any circumstance and I’m sorry. I was wrong, Sweetheart, what I did was wrong. I need to be sure I didn’t…cause you any serious harm. Will you let me do that?”

His words should have been a balm to soothe her pain, but they weren’t. Compared to the previous times they were together, what he’d done to her in this bed was wretched, practically sacrilegious. It was almost inconceivable that the man she’d spent so many hours with in the little cottage could do what he’d just done. Her bitterness over the entire day overwhelmed her and she wanted only to go home. Except she didn’t truly have a home anymore. Her parents

would turn her away should she try to return to them. They'd say she belonged with her husband. *This* strange new place was the only home she had now.

She lay on the bed in silence as he washed her thighs with the cloth, dipping between her legs, his touch tender. The cool dampness felt good against her skin. With hard-found will power, she held still for his ministrations.

"Where are my belongings?" she inquired after a time had gone by and there was only silence between them as he worked.

"They've been put in the adjoining chamber. Is there something you have need of?"

"I want a night rail."

He left her side for a moment, tossing the soiled cloth into a basin on a washstand, and returned with something black. "Will this do?"

It was a man's dressing gown, but she nodded, accepting it from his hands. She slipped it around her shoulders, slightly more comfortable to be less exposed. If she were about to fight a battle, she would do it clothed. The sleeves were far too long, falling over her hands, but it served her purpose.

"You look very fetching in my robe. Better than I ever have, I warrant." He smiled.

"My lord, I am very tired."

"Rest easy, Izzy. I'll not make any further demands of you this evening. I promise I'll not hurt you again."

She ignored his vehement vow and eyed him with distrust.

“Where will you sleep?”

He sighed heavily. “Izzy, you are my wife, and this is my bedchamber. ‘Tis only appropriate I slumber here with you.”

The thought of sleeping beside him had her stomach clenching in anxiety. What if he awoke in the night and wanted to do that *thing* to her again? She didn’t think she could submit to him a second time. Yet, by the granite set of his face, there would be no convincing him otherwise.

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t ever slept at his side before. The thought instantly brought to mind images of the hours she’d spent in the crofter’s cottage with Julian and she choked, wishing so very much that the man she’d known truly existed.

Ram reached out and took her hand, his eyes smoky with remorse.

She yanked her hand from his grasp.

She could sleep beside him until morning, and then she would demand he take her back to her family. She wouldn’t perpetuate this sham of a marriage one more night.

Slipping under the sheet, she kept as far to the side of her bed as she could, without falling off. She heard Ram as he moved about the room, heard the hiss of each candle extinguished before the room was plunged into darkness. The bed dipped as he settled himself on the other side.

“Good night, Izzy.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she lay in the dark, waiting for morning.

***

When Izzy awoke the next morning in the strange bed, she didn't remember where she was for a moment. It was very early in the morn and she'd slept fitfully, getting very little rest. As she lay there, the events of the day and the evening before crashed over her with sickening reality. She was married. To Julian. Except he wasn't Julian. He was a man who despised her as much as she despised him.

She was reminded just how much as she rolled onto her back and felt the discomfort between her thighs. She forced away the urge to cry as she remembered what he'd done to her, how much it had hurt. Her body now protested every motion and would make her movements today cumbersome and slow. She concentrated on putting the throbbing ache out of her mind. There were important things to be done this day.

Glancing quickly toward Ram's side of the bed, she found him awake and watching her.

"Good morning, wife." His smile was soft. She couldn't bring herself to respond in kind, but he continued as if she had. "I never had an opportunity to give you your wedding gift." He leaned toward the bedside table, then produced a long, blue velvet box. Opening the lid, he displayed a magnificent diamond and sapphire necklace and a matching pair of dangling earrings, truly a small fortune in jewels. "I bought this for you last week, in London."

"I don't want your gift, my lord. You can't buy my forgiveness with trinkets."

"I'm not trying to buy your forgiveness, sweetheart. 'Tis my

wedding gift to you."

She met his gaze directly. "Did you have any intention of giving me a gift when you brought me home last night? Or was I to receive it only if I earned it by pleasing you well enough? Tell me, Ramsay, if I'd fought you as I did but wasn't virgin, would you have withheld your gift?"

His smile disappeared. "Izzy," he reached for her hand, but she snatched it away, tucking it beneath the coverlet. He sighed. "Izzy, we must find a way to get past all this. Can we try to begin anew?"

Her mouth fell open in surprise. Did he *truly* believe it could be so simple after what he did? "My lord, I don't want to start anew." She rushed on before he could stop her. "I thought about this late into the night. I think we should seek an annulment."

His sharp bark of laughter took her aback, and his face went from laughing to sober in an instant. "You're not jesting, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Izzy, there will be no annulment. Our marriage was consummated. As unfortunate as that experience was, this marriage is legal in all ways."

"No one needs know that!" Panic set in, for last night she'd convinced herself he would go agree with her on this. "We have no business being married. You despise me and I abhor what you've done. 'Tis sheer folly to continue this sham of a marriage."

He sat up in the bed, turning to face her. "There will be no annulment!"

"But I don't want to be married to you! This has all been a

dreadful mistake."

His eyes flashed. "I'm afraid it's not up to you, Sweetheart. We are properly married in the eyes of the church and the crown, nothing will change that."

She fought the urge to weep.

"Izzy, I know we got off to a terrible beginning, but I'll make it up to you, I swear I will." His voice gentled. "You felt tenderness for me ere we came face to face yesterday. Surely you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

"I don't want to forgive you. I don't want to be married to you!"

His jaw clenched, his lips thinned and hardened. "You must find some way to reconcile yourself to this marriage, Isabelle. We are married and we *will* remain that way."

He flung himself from the bed. She averted her gaze from his nudity, utterly miserable at the entire turn of events.

"We have a wedding supper to attend at your parent's home, for family only. I suggest you ready yourself. Your things are in the chamber through that door." He pointed across the room, but she didn't look.

He stormed out of the bedchamber without awaiting a response.

A pair of hours later, Izzy stood at Ram's side at the door to her parent's house. How strange she could no longer open the door and barge right inside. This was no longer her home.

She felt awful; she was sluggish and tired, her body sore and

aching. When she'd caught sight of her image in a silver mirror, her paleness had shocked her. Pride had forced her to pinch her cheeks to bring some color to her face.

Her mother met them in the foyer, putting her arms around Izzy in welcome. She stood stiffly in her mother's embrace, for if she allowed herself any softness, surely she would break down.

"Come. Heath arrived just this morn. He's anxious to see you and meet your new husband." She smiled at Ram and hugged him warmly.

*Traitor.*

The thought of seeing her middle brother brought some light to Izzy's dismal day. More than a year had passed since he'd last come home and he was always the brother with whom she was closest.

Heath stood as she entered the sitting room, opening his arms to her, and she flew across the room, letting him enfold her in his strong embrace. He pressed a kiss to her temple.

"Is it true, my baby sister is a married woman now? I can scarce believe it. Yet you're still no bigger than a sparrow."

She couldn't believe it either. Still, she smiled at his familiar teasing. He forever made fun of her lack of height. "You look well, Heath." Tilting her head, she studied him with sisterly curiosity. In fact, he looked more than well. He'd fought his first battle for the royalist cause at the age of fourteen, and it had been his life's work ever since. Since those early days, he'd always carried himself with an air of grim determination. Now he looked relaxed, his eyes fairly sparkling with humor and warmth.

“The Netherlands appear to agree with you.”

“Aye, they do. As does one particular Dutch woman.”

Izzy forgot her own woes as true happiness for her brother engulfed her. “Oh, Heath! How wonderful. Will you bring home a wife soon?”

He winked. “She’s not the sort of woman a man marries, Izzy. But since marriage would be insane for a man in my line of work, I’m very content with the way things are. As is she.”

Izzy mentally snorted. She highly doubted it. Irritation with her brother flared. If his lady wasn’t the sort of woman a man like Heath would marry, it could only be that she was worldly and experienced. Good enough to be his mistress, but no more. The double standard between men and women had never before been so apparent, nor as appalling. Disappointment at Heath for belonging to the brotherhood of man that perpetuated such a double standard replaced the fleeting happiness she’d felt. It was illogical to hold her brother partly to blame for the ordeal she’d suffered the day before, but how different would her wedding night have been if men accepted in women the same behavior they themselves engaged regularly in?

Frowning, Heath held her out before him at arm’s length, studying her from head to toe, as if he noticed her quicksilver mood change. His blue eyes, the same shade as hers, narrowed. “You look bloody exhausted.” He was always one to get straight to the point. “Your husband had best treat you well.” He said low, for her ears only. “Or he’ll have to reckon with me.”

Izzy sucked in a hard breath. Heath had always been

perceptive- ‘twas that quality that made him such an asset to Charles’s network of spies and informers. “’Tis been a long few weeks,” She murmured, strangely hesitant before her family to lay the blame for her exhaustion at Ram’s feet.

“Well, don’t just stand there then, introduce me to your husband.”

*Her husband.* It sounded so strange. She had a husband. A husband she most certainly didn’t want.

Izzy turned to find Ram, who’d not followed her across the room, presumably to give her a moment of privacy with Heath. The instant their eyes met he smiled and strode to her side. The warmth in his smile disconcerted her, and before she could gather her wits enough to introduce him, her brother stepped forward. “No need to introduce us after all, Izzy.” Reaching for Ram’s hand, Heath clapped him warmly on the shoulder at the same time. “We met at Breda, if I recall.”

Ram shook his head. “I’m certain you have me confused with someone else.”

“Nay, my good man. You and I were awaiting an audience with the King at the same time.”

“You are mistaken.”

Heath frowned. “Julian James, yes?”

Izzy stifled a gasp, her gaze flying from her brother to her husband. She saw the barely noticeable tightening of Ram’s jaw. Her brother spoke true!

Ram glanced in her direction for an instant before turning his

attention to Heath. “I’m Ramsay Maitland, Viscount Royston.”

Her brother seemed bemused. “I apologize then, for you very much resemble someone I once met.” He shrugged and his quick smile reappeared. “All the same, it’s a pleasure to meet the man who has the courage and fortitude to take on my sister.”

“Heath-” She elbowed him in the stomach.

As her brother and husband chatted, Izzy’s mind spun with questions as it darted about, looking for a plausible explanation for Ram’s presence in Breda, for there was no doubt he *had* been there.

The coincidence of the name Julian James was too great, and Ram’s reaction too telling to leave any doubt he had indeed met with the King at his court of exiles. Yet according to Papa, Ram’s father had been a staunch Parliamentarian. What could explain Ram’s presence at the King’s side during Cromwell’s reign? Could he have been a double agent? Heath had told her of such men, who proclaimed fealty to Old Noll in order to ferret out important information and get it to Charles, at great risk to themselves.

For the first time since they spoke their wedding vows, Izzy wished to be alone with Ram to question him thoroughly.

Much to her dismay, her mother and brothers, as well as Ram’s father and sister, all contrived to keep that from happening. They were cheerful and sociable, drawing Ram into their boisterous conversation, but Izzy was too agitated to join in. When she wasn’t wondering about Ram’s true loyalties, a different and painful question consumed her. Where were Papa and Belinda?

Were they both gone from her life for good?

Frustrated by the inane conversation, she excused herself, stepping onto a terrace for some fresh air. The scent of the burgeoning summer washed over her with its smell of clean rain and wet grass and promise of warm days to come.

Should she find Papa and beg him to let her explain? Would it even matter? After all, she'd begged Ramsay to listen to her explanation, and look at how well that had turned out. He'd not believed her one whit. What if she confessed the lie to Papa and he didn't believe her, either? It would destroy her to know for certain that Papa's opinion of her had fallen so low.

When Ram's arms slipped around her from behind, she jumped, stiffening in his embrace. His breath was warm on the nape of her neck. "Why don't you seek him out and confess? Perhaps you can heal the rift betwixt you."

She hated that he knew where her thoughts had been. She chewed her lip as she weighed her reply.

"He's my father. Should he not accept and love me, no matter my faults?"

"I think any father would be hard pressed to remain calm in the face of a confession such as yours yesterday."

"I don't wish to discuss this with you, as *you* are precisely the reason Papa and I are at odds. It goes beyond what happened in his study yesterday."

She felt his sigh against her back. "And Miss Spencer? What's amiss between the two of you?"

She spun around, pushing out of his arms as she did so as to

take a few steps backward.

"Again, I believe the blame for that lies with you."

He studied her face, his grey eyes searching. "Belinda told you of our talk?"

As tears threatened to rise, Izzy bit her lip. "Talk? The two of you conspired together against me. She's *my* cousin, *my* closest friend. I can't understand how she could keep your secret from me. If only she'd told me…"

"If she had told you, then what? Would you have come willingly to this marriage?" His gaze was intense.

"Aye! Nay! I don't know!" It was so hard to think clearly when he looked at her like that. "I can't know what I would have done, but everything would have been different," she wrapped her arms across herself. "Yesterday would have been different." She focused on a spot over his shoulder. "I never expected yesterday to be anything but a trial, and yet when I realized you were my betrothed I was so sure, despite your anger, that things would be well after all. I thought that once we were alone I'd confess the truth and that perhaps we'd even laugh about it."

"Poor Izzy." He stroked the back of his fingers down her cheek. "Yesterday was truly an ordeal for you. It should have been one of the happiest days of your life and I'm sorry for the part I played in ruining it for you. If I could take it all back, I would. I'm sorrier than I can express in words."

The light touch of his fingers made her shiver, but not in revulsion, to her horror. She ought to pull away, but there was

something soothing and almost hypnotic about his voice. Even worse, there was a seductive edge to it that made her think of long hours spent in the crofter's hut. She didn't *want* Ram to remind her of the man she'd known as Julian.

"I don't know Belinda well, but it's obvious she loves you very much and only wants what's best for you."

Anger sparked again, giving her willpower to pull away from his touch. "That's the entire point! You don't know her and she doesn't know you, and yet the two of you conspired to keep me ignorant of your identity. Did either of you intend to tell me the truth, or did you think it would be funny to see me humiliated when I arrived at the chapel and found you waiting with the vicar?"

"Dammit, Izzy! Neither of us intended nor wanted to humiliate you! I should have told you the truth before the wedding, and I'm sure Belinda expected I would. When Belinda told me how you felt about our betrothal, I decided not to reveal myself so I could woo you. I didn't think you'd give me a chance if you knew the truth. Belinda didn't tell you only because she wants what's best for you."

Anger heated Izzy's face. "I'm so tired of everyone else thinking they know what's best for me. I'm a grown woman and can make my own decisions."

His eyes widened. "When I met you on May Day, you were scheming to give your virginity to the first stranger who appealed to you. Do you really believe that was a wise decision?"

"Wise or not, my virginity should have been mine to give away as I desired. I didn't deserve to have it forced from me!"

He flinched. “You’re absolutely right.”

His agreement sucked the wind from her argument, but she continued on as if he hadn’t agreed. “And that’s why you’ll agree to the annulment I so desire. I won’t ever forgive what you did. This marriage is doomed to failure.”

“We’ve already discussed this. There will be no annulment. That is final.” She watched his jaw set in a way she was fast becoming accustomed.

“Not even to keep your father from learning his precious son was a double agent, working *for* the King instead of against him?”

His eyes flashed, turning frosty. “Beware of making idle threats. You know *nothing* of which you speak.”

“Truly? ‘Tis but a mere coincidence my brother recognized you today as *Julian James?* I may be a lot of things, my lord, but stupid is not one of them.”

“Izzy-” his voice rang with a tone of warning.

“Nay! I’m tired of others running my life and making decisions for me. If you don’t grant me this annulment, I’ll tell your father what I know, and some of what I suspect.”

“That’s blackmail. Think long and hard before you travel this path, Isabelle. You don’t want to make an enemy of me. Trust me.”

“Never! I shall never trust you again.”

Satisfaction surged through her when fury flashed across his face. It felt good to be in control, even if just for a little while. The truth was, she didn’t think she could reveal to his father what he’d done, because she respected it too much. But he needn’t know that. He

needed only to believe she would do whatever she must.

"'Tis a shame my father will be in London, while you'll remain here at my whim." He bit out.

"We'll see about that, my lord."

He grabbed her by the upper arms and shook her, hard. "You will not do anything reckless for once. Do you understand me, Izzy?"

Looking pointedly at his grip, she raised an eyebrow. "My lord, you're hurting me, and I believe you vowed last night that would never happen again."

He dropped her arm as though it were on fire. But then he leaned close.

"Play your games all you like, Isabelle. They'll not make a difference. Say your good-byes, we're returning home."

***

Ram didn't say a word on the carriage ride back to Chesworth House. As soon as they entered the manor he stormed down the hall to his study, leaving Izzy standing in the foyer. She breathed a sigh of relief that she'd not have to fend off unwanted advances and retired to the bedchamber she'd hoped never to see again. She occupied herself trying to think of a solution to her new dilemma. Obviously, her threat must have concerned Ram, for he'd hurried her out of her parents' home before she could approach his father. By tomorrow the Earl would be in London. To give her threat any teeth, she too needed to be in London. The question was how to accomplish it? What was the best mode of travel. Once in London she'd have need of her gowns and other assorted items, which couldn't be carried on horseback. Yet,

if she took a coach, Ram most certainly would follow and overtake her.

She needed help.

Seating herself at the desk in her bedchamber, she penned a note to Belinda, asking her to come to Izzy's new home for a visit. Then she wrote another note to Heath, asking him to invite her new husband for a drink the day after tomorrow, so he might begin to feel a member of the family.

She gnawed on her lower lip as she contemplated her idea. She would need Belinda's unwilling help to succeed.

But would Belinda respond to her plea?

# Chapter 15

The next morning Izzy paced alone in her bedchamber, palms damp with sweat as she awaited word from Belinda.

Last evening Izzy had gone to sleep alone in the bed in her smaller chamber, but when Ram came upstairs he'd carried her through to the big bed in his adjoining chamber. For a few panic-ridden minutes, she'd lain rigid with fear and anticipation, but he hadn't made any demands upon her. When he climbed into bed and rolled to his side with his back to her, she fell asleep again fast enough. When she awoke in the morn, he was gone.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

*Oh, Belinda. I need you so.*

After an hour of endless pacing, there was a knock upon the bedchamber door. Izzy leapt across the room and yanked it open to find Hawthorne, the butler, on the other side. "My lady, you have a caller."

With a quick nod of thanks, she tore barefoot down the stairs. Profound relief coursed through her when she spotted Belinda seated in the ladies receiving room, an overly opulent salon done in gold and almost every pastel shade Izzy could ever imagine. A frilly pale pink curtain covered the large window inset with a plush covered cushion in pale green. Everywhere one looked, gilded cherubs smiled back, from atop the marble mantle to the paintings on the wall, and the statuettes that sat on almost every table in the room.

Ram's mother hadn't possessed the best of taste.

Izzy bit her lip when she saw Belinda staring all around the room, a look of almost comic disbelief on her face. At any other time they would have dissolved into a fit of giggles together over finding themselves in a salon like this. There had never been a gulf this large between them and more than anything Izzy wanted to make things right with Belinda. At the same time guilt assailed her for what she was about to do.

She stepped into the room, pulling the double doors closed behind her. Belinda jumped to her feet at the sound, wariness evident in her gaze. Izzy took a deep breath and broke the silence.

"I seem to be saying this to you quite a bit of late, Bel. I'm so sorry for what I said. I have no excuse, only that I was overwrought and emotional when we last spoke."

Some of the uncertainty faded from Belinda's eyes and she stepped closer. "Why were you so overwrought, Izzy? Weren't you at all pleased to discover your betrothed was Julian? Even if only little?"

Izzy pressed her lips together, debating how much to reveal. But if she wanted Bel to be sympathetic Izzy would have to tell her the complete truth. Seating herself on a pale yellow sofa, she patted the space beside her.

Once Belinda seated herself, Izzy launched into the humiliating story, only wanting to get it over with. "I think I might have been, Bel, I truly believe once my anger over his deception wore off, I would have realized how lucky I was that my husband was already someone I knew and liked, even if he wasn't Paul." Izzy paused to swallow hard

over the lump that arose in her throat when she thought of Paul. “But something happened that you don’t know about, and that’s why I was so upset when we spoke. I did something awful only moments before I found out the truth about Julian.”

“Oh, Izzy, what did you do?” Belinda reached for her hand and clutched it tightly. Izzy bit back tears at this evidence that she’d not lost her cousin’s staunch loyalty.

“I told Papa I was no longer a virgin, which was a complete falsehood,” Izzy rushed to clarify as Belinda’s mouth opened to ask the inevitable question. “I thought it was my last chance to escape the wedding. I didn’t reckon on Ramsay being in the study with Papa when I made the foolish confession.”

“Oh, no!” Bel clamped her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror.

Izzy stared at her lap. “Papa all but disowned me. Ram too was enraged, Bel. He hadn’t taken my virginity and assumed someone else had. Why he chose to go forth with the marriage after that is something I’ll probably never understand. When you and I spoke, I was trying to figure out how to make everything right. I tried to explain the truth to Ram later that evening, on our journey here, but he wouldn’t believe me, no matter what I said…or how hard I fought him.”

She closed her eyes, beginning to tremble “Oh Bel, it was so awful. I-I tried so hard to make him listen, but he wouldn’t, he thought me wanton. He called me a whore.” Her eyes burned. “When I tried to resist him, he forced himself on me…”

She clenched her fists, trying to keep her emotions controlled, but a sob escaped anyway, quickly followed by another, and then another, until she shook with them.

Belinda put her arms around her, cradling Izzy's head against her shoulder, holding Izzy in silence while she cried for long minutes.

"Dear God, Izzy. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say." Belinda pulled back, taking Izzy's face in her hands. "I *never* would have gone along with him if I believed for even a moment he could be so violent and cruel. Surely you know that?"

Izzy nodded. "I do, Belinda, and I'm sorry for the things I said at the wedding. I was so scared and miserable after everything came out in Papa's study, and I'm afraid I lashed out at you in my fear. I didn't mean any of it, surely you believe me?"

"I believe you. Come." She wiped Izzy's tears with her thumb. "What will you do? Can you go to your father?"

Izzy shook her head. "Papa said I was…I am unwelcome in his house. He's so angry with me…" She took a deep breath, for here was where she had to tell her lie. She prayed that just one more time Belinda would be able to forgive her when the truth was revealed. "I'm not quite sure what to do. Ram is adamant we remain married. I've no idea why. We don't suit, and I know we never will. How can I ever forgive him, even if he's sorry for it now? His remorse can't undo what he did." She looked into her cousin's sympathetic blue eyes. "I'm terrified of being alone with him, but still he insists we share a bedchamber. I need to go away for a few days, I need some time alone to think about everything calmly and rationally, without the fear

that's with me constantly in this house. But Ram will never allow it. I know Tyrone left last night for Papa's manor in Wales. If I can somehow go to him I know he'll let me stay, at least for a few days." As the eldest son, Tyrone spent most of his time in Wales, administering to the newly restored estate. Though the property was Papa's, Tyrone's writ ran as law through the small property.

"Ramsay will be furious if you leave him," Belinda warned.

"I know. But Tyrone would never allow harm to come to me."

"You're right. What can I do to help?"

"You've done enough by being here for me, Bel. And when Ram finds I've flown from him, he'll probably come to you straightaway, demanding answers. You needn't lie to him on my behalf, for Ty will protect me."

Belinda reached for her hand again. "I'll do whatever you need me to do, even if it means lying for you. I feel awful about my role in this all of this. I thought what Ramsay intended was truly romantic and that he would cherish you."

Izzy ruthlessly shoved away memories of May Day and afternoons shared in the crofter's hut when he *had* romanced and cherished her. He had an ulterior motive then, but his true colors had shown themselves on their wedding day. Nothing that came before had been real. Izzy forced her thoughts back to the issue at hand, for if she dwelled upon how much she missed Julian, she would weep.

Belinda was an abysmal liar, which was why it was so important she believe Izzy was truly going to Tyrone. Izzy *hated* manipulating her cousin like this, but she could see no other choice.

“Nay, Bel, please don’t lie for me. He might not even seek you out, but if he does, he’ll have every intention of finding me, and if we have to battle it out, I’d rather it be at Tyrone’s where I’ll be protected, rather than here where no one will come to my aid.”

Belinda nodded her understanding. “That doesn’t mean I won’t give him a piece of my mind.”

Izzy hugged her cousin, hard. “You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t. I love you, Bel, you believe me, right?”

Belinda hugged her in return. “I know. And I love you too, though you give me fits at times.” They both laughed then. “But you’ve every right to be upset right now. A groom should be tender with his bride. You didn’t deserve such brutal treatment.” A mischievous grin appeared. “’Tis horrible enough you’re forced to live in a house with a room decorated like *this*!”

Izzy clamped a hand over her mouth to prevent the laugh that arose, but it burst out anyway. The moment Izzy was overcome with giggles, Belinda fell back against the sofa cushions laughing so hard tears escaped.

When their laughter ran its course, Izzy told Belinda of the letter she’d written her brother. “If everything goes as I hope, Ram will be at the house tomorrow, with Heath.” Izzy imparted.

“Heath,” Belinda exhaled the name with a wistful sigh.

Izzy’s thoughts turned from her own woes to her cousin’s. Belinda had been in love with Heath since they were hardly more than children. “Oh Bel, are you still infatuated with my scoundrel of a brother?” Izzy’s heart went out to her, for she knew what it was like

to be denied what one wanted most.

Belinda pressed her lips together, her cheeks scarlet.

"You know he never plans to wed, don't you, because of his work?" Izzy probed gently, for she ached to see Belinda suffer from unrequited love. "And he considers you as much a sister to him as I am." Izzy wouldn't tell Belinda of Heath's love for a Dutch woman. She could save her cousin that unnecessary pain at least.

"I know, you're right, and even if none of that were the case, I'm not of high enough status for him."

"Don't be a goose. The man who wins your heart for good will be the luckiest man in the world, even if he's a prince."

Belinda's smile was sad. "I appreciate you saying that. And I'm sure Heath will be off on his travels again in no time at all. 'Tis easier not to think about him when he is not underfoot."

That hadn't been Izzy's experience with Paul, and even more disturbingly, the man she'd thought of as Julian. Each time "Julian" went away, Izzy had pined; there was no other word for it. But she'd not disabuse Belinda of her notion. Someday the perfect man would see through Bel's shyness and awkwardness and want her for the wonderful person she was, even without a dowry or a powerful father or brother.

Izzy walked with Belinda as she prepared to leave. At the door, she gave her cousin another tight hug, sorry to see her go and even sorrier still to once more be trapped in the house alone. "You're the best friend in the world, Bel."

"Take care of yourself, Izzy, and be careful. Lord Royston is not

a man to trifle lightly with."

"Well, Lord Royston has never yet tangled with the likes of me!"

Belinda laughed, then descended the steps to the waiting carriage.

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Ram entered the dining room, then retraced his steps when Izzy wasn't seated at the table. At the bottom of the stairs, he intercepted a maid carrying a covered tray.

"Is that for Lady Royston?"

The girl nodded. "Aye, milord."

With a grin, Ram swept the food-laden tray from her hands. "I'll take it to her, she'll not need any further assistance tonight, thank you."

He strode up the stairs to their chamber, intent on deconstructing the wall Izzy had erected between them. This was ridiculous. They were married, for better or for worse, and he had no desire to live in a state of limbo. The sooner they dealt with the obstacles created by their unfortunate past, the sooner they could get on with their future together.

Shouldering the door open, he stopped short. Izzy was immersed in a tub of still steaming water. Her back was to the door and she didn't notice his intrusion.

"You can leave the tray near the bed, Meg. Thank you."

Ram couldn't suppress a smile. After setting the tray down he tread on silent feet over the plush carpet to stand behind her. Her

head was thrown back, resting on the rim of the tub, her eyes shut as she let the steam envelope her.

He peeked into the tub, then instantly regretted it. His mouth dried at the sight of Izzy's bare skin, pinkened from the heat, submerged in the water. Droplets of moisture formed beads on her neck, only to roll down through the valley between her breasts. He yearned to lick each water droplet from every inch of satiny skin.

Resting his hands lightly on her shoulders, he let the tips of his fingers brush her collarbone on either side. She jumped as though he'd touched her with fire, pulling her knees up to her chest to cover her nakedness.

"What are you doing in here, you lout?"

"'Tis my chamber too, sweetheart."

"Stop calling me sweetheart! I'm not your sweetheart. I'm not your anything."

"Izzy." He used his best cajoling voice, leaned over her shoulder and picked up a discarded sponge. "You're my wife. And I want you to be my sweetheart. You never resisted before when I called you such."

"I liked you before."

He laughed. She had such spirit and he was a very lucky man. Ram lowered the sponge into the tub, saturating it with the scented water, and brought it to her shoulders, trailing it over her glistening skin. "I think if you give me a chance, you might learn to like me again."

"Doubtful. What are you doing?" She chewed her lower lip.

“I’m assisting you with your bath. It’s impossible to clean one’s own back thoroughly.”

“I don’t need your help.”

He brought his lips to her ear. “I know you don’t *need* my help, but I wager it would be worth it for you should you accept it.”

He watched her shudder, and a satisfied thrill pulsed through him. He still affected her, and as long as that was the case, there was a chance for them.

She didn’t relax her legs from her chest, but she didn’t protest when he continued stroking her back with the sponge.

When he finished her back, he moved with stealth to the side of the tub, bringing the sponge around over her shoulders, stroking down her arm. Her eyes were shut and her breathing strained, as she clearly fought a battle against her own needs.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Ram leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. Her eyes shot open and her mouth dropped in surprise, but before she could speak a word of protest, he pressed his advantage, sliding his tongue into the opening she’d given him.

He kissed her leisurely, letting his tongue glide against hers before taking her lower lip between his teeth and nibbling. The sponge fell from his grip as he took her shoulders in his hands so he could better pull her towards him, uncaring if water soaked his clothing as he leaned deeper into the tub. Her hands slid around his neck, settling in his hair. Arousal burned through him, along with satisfaction at her capitulation.

Satisfaction turned to stunned surprise when she used her grip to tear his mouth off hers and submerged his head beneath the surface. Water rushed up his nose, into his mouth, and he thrust himself from the tub, gasping and choking.

*The saucy wench!*

He wiped his eyes clear, then narrowed them at her, noticing she was now the satisfied one. Which wouldn't do at all. Oh, he wanted to satisfy her, only in a completely different manner.

To that end, he leaned over the tub, slid his arms beneath her knees and around her shoulders and hefted her from her bath, dripping water and all. She squealed, her arms going round his neck, seeking purchase.

"Ram, what are you doing? Put me down, this instant!"

"I'll put you down soon enough."

He carried her across the chamber, leaving a mess in his wake, then deposited her in the middle of their plush bed. She looked like a water nymph with strands of wet hair fanning out against the silk of the sheets, her pale nakedness contrasted by the dark coverlet, her skin covered with glistening droplets . She was a siren, calling to him. He followed her down, covering her with his body, seeking her lips again with his.

She trembled against him, and not with desire. He lifted his head and bit back a foul curse at the look of raw fear on her face. This was his fault, and it was killing him. He'd destroyed the vivacious girl he'd known in the crofter's cottage, the girl who never once feared anything he'd done to her, whose bravery and trust in him had been

absolute. His rash act on their wedding night was responsible for the shadows that lingered in her beautiful eyes and he was at a complete loss as to how to regain the trust he so unthinkingly shattered.

He lifted himself on his elbows so she was no longer trapped by his weight.

"Izzy? Are you well?"

"I-I don't want this, Ramsay."

He thrust his fingers through his damp hair in frustration, then lay beside her on the bed, reaching for her hand. "I promise, Izzy. I'll not hurt you again. I won't do anything you're not comfortable with."

Her eyes widened. "I'm not comfortable with *anything*, Ram. We don't suit. I wish you'd just agree to the annulment so we both might get on with our lives."

Pushing himself off the bed in a violent motion, he paced beside it. "I've told you, there will be no annulment."

Her lower lip began to quiver and he couldn't stand it any longer. Hurting her was the last thing he wanted to do, but he wouldn't let her go. He couldn't. "Give me an opportunity to make this up to you. Just one chance. I *will* make you happy, if you but allow me to."

"I'll never be happy with you, Ram, never. I'm in love with someone else."

Her words shredded his tenderness and fury erupted. How could she even dare mention her feelings for another man at this moment, while they were in their marital bed? "Aye, I know all about your misplaced love for that peacock, Huntley."

She gasped. “Belinda told you?”

He merely stared.

“I don’t care if she did tell you! How dare you talk about Paul like that?” She scrambled to sit, yanking the bedcover around her, then tossed her wet tresses over her shoulder. Swinging her legs off the mattress, she stood, keeping the length of the large bed between them. “Paul would never treat me as you’ve done.”

Was she *comparing* him to Huntley? And finding *him* wanting? By God, there were some things that weren’t done, especially in the bedchamber shared by a husband and wife! “If Huntley wanted you so badly, why then didn’t he come for you?” Her face paled at the cruel taunt and he instantly regretted the harsh words. Lord, he didn’t mean to say such things to her! He must have patience, must remember she was still young and idealistic, and had suffered much in the last few days, mostly at his hands. Yet she dared talk of loving another man right in their very bedchamber, and it stabbed him to the core. She had a way of bringing out the absolute worst in him, turning him into an autocratic tyrant he didn’t much like or respect.

“Paul must have a valid reason for staying away, this I know!”

“I know it too, Isabelle. Paul stayed away because you are a shrew!”

Ram stormed to the door, slamming it behind him with a savagery that shook the frame.

Uttering a foul curse, he strode toward the haven of his study, where he could drown himself in drink.

# Chapter 16

As soon as Ram left their bedchamber the next morning, Izzy sprang into action. Heath had not only invited Ram for a few drinks, her brother had invited her husband on a hunting expedition that would keep them out most of the day. Heath didn't know of her intentions, and yet it couldn't have worked out better.

Using the smallest trunk at her disposal, she folded her three best gowns into it, along with the assorted accessories she would need to go with them- including the diamond and sapphire necklace and earrings Ram had gifted her the morning after their wedding. And why shouldn't she? She'd paid in blood for those baubles. If she were to go to London as Lady Royston, she would need look the part.

She lamented her worn and out of fashion gowns, but it had been so long since her father could spare money for such frivolities while they were exiled, so she would have to make do. She would commission new gowns upon arriving in London.

As she finished packing, she realized she would have need of a servant, to help her dress and lend credence to her role as a woman of high status. She sought the little maid, Meg, and directed her to gather whatever she needed to accompany Izzy.

Packed and ready to depart, Izzy took a deep, steadying breath. The next part of her plan relied on manipulating Hawthorne to do her bidding. Wearing a pale green day gown, she descended the stairs at a sedate pace, as though this were any other morning. Hawthorne

appeared at her side as soon as she reached the landing.

She'd begun to woo the butler the day before, asking him questions about the household, at the same time gleaning important information. For instance, he'd given her the address of her husband's house in London, as well as shown her where she could find money for household spending. She was about to avail herself of both.

"Oh, Hawthorne, you are just the man I was looking for." She gave him her most gracious smile.

"How may I be of service, my lady?"

"It seems a mistake was made and some of my cousin's items were brought here. Obviously one of the maids mistook her clothing for mine, we are very close in size."

"I shall remedy the situation right away."

She waved her hand through the air. "There's no need for you to do that, Hawthorne, I've packed Belinda's items in a small trunk. If you'll just have a carriage brought round I will return it myself"

"Don't concern yourself with it, my lady, I shall be happy to have the trunk sent on your behalf, and I'll send a footman who will fetch the correct trunk back."

"Oh no, Hawthorne, I should so love to visit my parents and this is as good excuse as any." She held her breath in anticipation.

"Of course, my lady. I'll send someone for the trunk and have Guy bring the carriage round right away."

"Thank you, Hawthorne." She smiled sincerely. "I'd be utterly lost without your aid."

He flushed with obvious delight. "It is my pleasure, Lady

Royston."

*Lady Royston*. It still seemed strange to be addressed by a new name, a lady in her own right. Well, she mustn't become accustomed to the title. She wouldn't have it for long. But as long as she did, she'd make full use of it.

"I think I shall take Meg along as well, Hawthorne. She has such a knack for doing my hair, I would love for her to help me dress for dinner. Could you possibly spare her for the day?"

"She's your personal servant, think nothing of it."

Izzy let out a breath of relief as she settled into the carriage. As soon as Chesworth House was out of sight, she tapped on the roof to gain the driver's attention and leaned out the window to address him.

"My Lady?"

"There's been a change in my plans. We go to Padstow, if you please." Journeying to Padstow, though out of the way, was necessary to lend credence to her tale of fleeing to her brother in Wales.

The driver frowned, but didn't argue her directions. He tipped his cap, then returned to the horses, and as they pulled out of the long Chesworth driveway, instead of heading towards Rendstell manor, they traversed the opposite direction.

Once in Padstow she directed her driver to take her to a coaching inn. Fighting back memories of her May Day visit just weeks ago, she turned to her driver.

"I won't be needing your services anymore today, Guy."

"But my lady, I cannot leave you here alone. It's not safe."

She put her hand on his arm, fluttering her lashes as she looked

up at him beseechingly. “Meg is here with me. And I’m not returning home, Guy. I’m booking passage to Wales to visit my brother.”

His brows drew together in dismay. “Does Lord Royston know of these plans, my lady?

Guilt assailed her, for Ram would likely vent his rage upon the hapless driver.

She tossed her hair, striving for nonchalance. “It matters not, Guy. And you may tell my husband so, if he asks.”

The driver blanched, but argued no more. Placing the small trunk on the side of the road, he returned to the carriage and started back the way they had come. She waited until he was out of sight before turning to Meg.

“Stay here, Meg. I must hire a coach for our journey.”

The maid gasped. “My lady, how will we manage on our own?”

Izzy resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I lived for a decade in exile, Meg, with very few luxuries and amenities. Surely between the two of us, we will manage just fine.”

*As long as my husband doesn’t catch us*. But Izzy left that thought unsaid.

***

After they’d reached Fowey, on the opposite coast from Padstow, Izzy hired a ship to take them to Portsmouth. They traveled through the night, and Izzy awoke in the morning with enough time to be topside as they pulled into Portsmouth harbor. Even so early in the morning the place bustled with activity.

Stretching aching muscles, she yawned. Worry over Ram’s

reaction coupled with her already frazzled nerves over the journey had conspired to keep her tossing and turning through the night. She looked forward to this last leg of the journey, so she might find Ram's house and seek her bed early.

She returned to the cabin and woke Meg. The maid helped Izzy into an older blue gown that would be more comfortable to travel in than her best gown with its very pointed bodice. The maid then plaited her hair for her. Together they wrestled the trunk from the cabin, placing it on the dock. Here there was no shortage of waiting coaches, and Izzy was able to hire one in short order to take them on the long journey into London. After the driver had loaded the trunk into the carriage, she gave him the address of Ram's house in Bishopsgate, then settled back against the squabs for the journey.

Izzy woke with a start, looking around at various landmarks that unmistakably proclaimed they'd reached London. She'd slept almost the entire length of the passage, and the sounds of the city must have awoken her. As the coach pulled up before an elegant townhome, Izzy's palms began to sweat. She was about to enter unknown territory and face her husband's household staff, but she *would* maintain her poise and control no matter what.

Servants appeared from the house to help her from the coach and take her trunk. One even paid the driver the agreed upon fare for the journey. Goodness, Ram's staff was efficient! With a mental shake of her head and her shoulders straight, she walked up the steps of the imposing whitewashed house to meet the impeccably attired butler standing inside the threshold of her temporary abode.

If he was surprised by the unexpected arrival of a visitor, it didn't show on his weathered face. "How do you do, Miss…?" The butler trailed off, waiting for her to identify herself. When she did, his eyes opened wide.

"I am Isabelle, Lady Royston."

"My lord did tell us to prepare for his imminent marriage. Many felicitations on your nuptials, my lady. I am Dexter, and if you need anything at all, you must come to me directly."

"Thank you, Dexter."

"Will Lord Royston be joining you?"

"Not for a few days yet. He has pressing business in Cornwall."

"Of course." He motioned towards the stairs. "Let me show you to your chamber, all has been prepared in anticipation of your arrival."

Piqued at this proof of Ram's absolute assurance that she'd marry him despite his charade, she also couldn't help but be pleased he'd gone to so much trouble to delight her. Beautiful and opulent were the first words to come to mind as she took in her new bedchamber. With walls covered in striped damask of pale green and yellow, the room had a dainty, feminine feel, much different than the heavy, masculine feel of the chamber she'd shared with Ram at Chesworth. The green carpeting beneath her feet was plush and already she could imagine the way her bare toes would be buried in it in the evening. A pale yellow chaise lounge sat near the window, and a beautiful crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. Braziers set along the walls cast a warm glow around the room, reflecting light in the

enormous polished silver mirror that stood in the corner. On the far wall of the chamber was a large ornate bed, its slender wooden posts rising towards the ceiling with carved cherubs and nymphs adorning them. A gauzy pale green curtain draped around the bed.

Obviously, Ram's mother had had little or no say in the decoration of this chamber.

If Izzy designed a chamber for herself, she couldn't imagine one more perfect.

"Will this satisfy you, my lady?" Dexter inquired.

"Oh,'Tis perfect, I love it."

He smiled, then pointed to a door on one side. "Your wardrobe is in there, and through that door," he pointed to another door on the opposite side of the room, "lies Lord Royston's chamber."

Some of her joy faded. When Ram caught up with her, he was going to be very angry and very close at the same time.

"Dexter, may I have a copy of the keys for this room?"

He gave her a peculiar look. "I'll make certain you have them directly." He cleared his throat. "You've had a long journey, my lady. Would you like dinner sent here to the room so you can relax?"

"That would be wonderful. You are so very thoughtful. Is there a chamber you could plenish for my servant, Meg?"

"Think no more on it, I'll see her to a chamber in the servants' quarters with all haste."

"I shall need new gowns made, and quickly. Would it be possible to have a modiste brought round tomorrow?"

"That will be no problem at all."

Apparently, anything she wanted was hers for the taking.

“Again, I am grateful to you.” She bestowed a bright smile upon him. “I believe you might be the most efficient butler I’ve ever met.”

Her flattery brought a blush to his pale cheeks. “You are most welcome. You must not hesitate to call for me should you have need of anything at all.”

“I will not.”

When the butler had pulled the door shut behind him as he left, Izzy collapsed onto the bed in relief and exhaustion. She’d done it! The first part was behind her, but still the worst part —facing Ram— loomed before her. She needed to attend to her business as fast as possible.

Tomorrow she’d see about gaining an audience with the King.

# Chapter 17

Ram was furious.

He'd spent a pleasant day with Izzy's brothers, Eric and Heath. They'd gone hunting in the morning, then spent the afternoon playing cards, drinking, and conversing. The two men had regaled him with harrowing stories of the mischief his wife had wrought as a young girl, and Ram had pitied her father for having to be the one to clean up her messes.

He should have saved the pity for himself.

Upon arriving home he'd known right away something was wrong when Hawthorne queried whether or not Izzy would be remaining at Rendstell Manor for the night. As soon as the butler told him Izzy had taken a trunk with her, Ram knew she'd fled.

Scarcely home for more than a few minutes, and more than a little unsteady from drink, he'd jumped on Mercury and ridden back to Rendstell, where he'd demanded to speak with Belinda.

Izzy's cousin had been decidedly cool to him as he questioned her about Izzy's destination; until finally he impressed upon her the dangers Izzy could face traveling alone through the countryside. Belinda informed him Izzy had gone to her brother's estate in Wales, which appeared likely when he questioned his very unhappy driver, who claimed he'd brought Izzy and one maid to Padstow earlier in the day.

Ram had ridden through the night, arriving at Tyrone's home

early in the morning, only to face a blank look and questioning eyebrow when he'd demanded to see his wife.

"I've not seen Izzy since I gave her away and placed her in your protection at your wedding ceremony. Have you misplaced her already?" Tyrone had drawled.

Ram seethed, and Tyrone's amusement didn't help. After resting Mercury for a few hours, he'd once again jumped into the saddle, and ridden back to Chesworth House.

Nay. If fury was what he'd felt upon discovering she'd run away, there was not a strong enough word to describe the emotions coursing through him now. Fury, mixed with a rising concern, because his wife was missing and might be in trouble and he had no idea where to find her.

He found himself back at Rendstell Manor the next morning, questioning each of her relatives about Izzy's whereabouts.

Belinda's face paled when she learned Izzy hadn't arrived in Wales. "Think, Belinda, 'tis important. Is there any place else she might have gone?"

"She told me she was going to Wales. That is all I know, my lord."

Izzy's mother was near tears. "Where could she be? And why did she leave in the first place? And all alone?"

He sighed, and met his father-in-law's concerned eyes. "I'm afraid Izzy believes our marriage would be best served with an annulment."

"Why? And how? The marriage was consummated" Heath

stated as if there could be no doubt. But then his glance landed on Ram and Heath narrowed his eyes. “Wasn’t it?”

Ram flushed. “The marriage is legal in every way.”

“London.” Izzy’s father said.

Ram turned to him. “London?”

“I know Izzy, and if she’s truly after an annulment, she’ll seek the King and plead her case before him. She’s probably at White Hall at this very moment. Everything else was naught but a ruse to make you think she’d gone to Wales.”

Suddenly it all made sense, though Ram doubted it was the King alone Izzy planned to see. Ram’s father was in London. She was going to do exactly as she threatened. “Why on Earth would she believe the King of England would ever get involved in a private matter between a husband and wife?”

Beaumont sighed, and for the barest moment a look of affection crossed his face. “The day Izzy met Charles, she climbed onto his lap, as bold as can be. She couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years of age. She asked him if it was true that he was the King of England. When Charles assured her he was, she blithely told him he’d better return to England then and reclaim his throne, for he’d get nowhere sitting about in France. I was appalled, but as you might imagine, Charles was quite amused. Since then our king has always been overly indulgent with Izzy, and we crossed paths often with him at Court in Saint Germain and in Holland. She probably believes that if she can convince him she’s very unhappy, he’ll step in and rescue her.”

The thought of a young Izzy playing military advisor and dictating to the king was endearing, but the knowledge that Charles was particularly fond of Izzy left Ram cold. He too knew their monarch quite well, and while Charles may have been indulgent with her when she was a child, she was now a very beautiful woman and the King had a soft spot for exquisite females. Ram also knew Charles loved to play the part of rescuer to damsels in distress. Ram shuddered to think about what Izzy might give up in exchange for her freedom.

"Do you know where in London she might go?"

The Baron shook his head. "I've not yet had an opportunity to restaff our London house since we've returned, but she may have gone there. Or she might have gone directly to the source and taken rooms at White Hall, to be close to the king."

Ram shuddered again, though her father obviously misconstrued his concern. "Fear not, Ramsay. Izzy has been surrounded by the courtiers of Charles' court most of her life, though we lived in exile. She has friends aplenty who will guide her."

It wasn't Izzy's navigation through the Royal Palace that concerned Ram. He doubted Beaumont had been to White Hall since he'd returned from the restoration celebrations a year past, so he most likely did not know what an utter den of iniquity the place had become. And no one contributed more to the court's vice than the king.

Ram was almost tempted to leave Izzy to her own devices. But concern and possessiveness got the better of him, and he readied himself for another tiring journey, even as he made a promise to

himself. When he came face to face with his errant wife again, he would take great pleasure in tanning her exquisite arse.

***

Izzy studied the array of fine fabrics in bright jewel tones laid out before her. It was such a joy to see them after the somber colors imposed on the people of the country by Cromwell for so long. Dexter had done a magnificent job doing her bidding, and the dressmaker had arrived early, with trunks of fashion accessories in tow.

All Izzy had to do now was make her selection and she would have a new wardrobe in a matter of days. She chose from a bolt of sapphire blue silk, a satin in a deep indigo shade, and an emerald green damask. She intended to woo a king and gowns made from all three of these colors would look striking with her dark hair and blue eyes.

She quickly picked the rest of the material needed for undergarments, crinolines and petticoats, and made a selection of shoes, fans, and masks. The dressmaker was enthusiastic to begin work on the gowns, and Izzy was enthusiastic to hand Ram the bill for the expensive trousseau. She offered double payment to the woman if she could produce the gowns in under a week.

One problem arose immediately. Izzy lacked anything of sufficient quality to wear that evening if she were to journey to White Hall and seek an audience with the King. “Madame Papille, do you have any gowns with you that may be altered now so I might have something to wear tonight?”

The French modiste pursed her lips for a moment, then

brightened, clapping her hands together as she called to one of her assistants, “bring me ze gown of seelver from the coach!” Then she turned to Izzy. “A mistrez of a Duke had zees gown commissioned, but once she tried it on, it made her appear very sallow. But with your coloring, Madame, you weel sparkle in ze gown! It will be *tres bon!”* The dressmaker hurried out of the room.

When she reappeared with garment in hand, Izzy was entranced with the gown presented before her. Made of a delicate silver fabric that shimmered in the light, the pointed bodice directed attention to the split skirt that would look beautiful over a petticoat of pale pink, which she already happened to have on hand.

“I’ll take it!” she cried with delight. “Do you think we can fit it right now so I can wear it tonight?”

“*Certainement*. We weel have you feeted right away.”

After measurements were taken for the new gowns and she’d stood still to be pinned for the alterations of the silver gown, Izzy was satisfied with the day’s work. She’d also had Madame Papille’s assistants take one of her old gowns and, with a little bit of creative stitching, they’d removed the lace that covered the shoulders and lowered the neckline to reveal a low décolletage, and brought in the bodice so it fit snugly down to the skirt, which then flared out. Though it was plain and unadorned, they’d managed to bring it more into mode. Now Izzy had gowns enough for two evenings at White Hall, and by the third day, Madame Papille had promised to deliver at least one completed new gown.

Finally, the dressmaker and her assistants left and Izzy began

planning the evening. She went downstairs for a light supper, then rushed back to her bedchamber, calling for Meg as she went.

She was already in her undergarments and stockings by the time Meg arrived and helped finish getting into her corset and then into the delicate silver creation. The maid touched the fabric in awe.

“You look beautiful, my lady. The king won’t know what hit him when he lays eyes upon you.”.

Izzy preened under the compliment, then set the maid to the task of creating a stylish fashion for her hair. She’d bought some silver ribbon from Madame Papille, and Meg wove it into her tresses as she pinned Izzy’s hair up. The shimmering ribbon matched the fabric of the gown, and set the red in her hair sparkling. Meg clasped the diamond and sapphire necklace Ram had gifted her around her neck, then stepped aside so Izzy could see the results in the mirror.

Izzy almost didn’t recognize herself.

The gown clung to her curves like a second skin, and the low cut of the bodice showed off her high breasts to perfection. The pink of her petticoats peeking through hinted at virtue. The combination of sophistication and innocence would work well to her advantage at the jaded court.

The last time she’d worn the latest fashions, she’d been barely more than a child. Now, full grown, she looked every bit the seductive woman she must be if she wanted to have her way with the King. Papa may not have had the money to provide her with new wardrobes whilst they were in exile, but she’d honed her flirting and coquettishness on Charles’s courtiers at every opportunity. She was

ready to take on St. James!

***

Izzy arrived at White Hall in Lord Royston's personal coach, with his crest painted clearly on the side, praying all the while his father, the Earl, had not decided to attend that evening. Instead of heading to the presence chamber as she'd expected, they were directed instead to the beautiful Banqueting House designed by Inigo Jones for King James I, which sat just within the Holbein gateway. A celebration of some sort was in progress. She groaned aloud, the sound echoing in the carriage. There would be even more courtiers present than the norm and she swallowed hard, as her stomach fluttered.

There was no need to be nervous. As a married woman it was completely appropriate for her to spend an evening alone at White Hall. It might even be enjoyable to meet old friends and acquaintances she hadn't seen since the news of Cromwell's death sent the royalists flocking home to London in droves.

As she stepped inside, the splendor of the building awed her. She'd been in royal palaces across the continent, but the Banqueting House was truly a piece of awesome architecture. Even crammed full with courtiers, the interior was a remarkable sight. The enormous hall rose two stories high, the second floor open to look down on the hall below. Magnificent columns in a style reminiscent of Ancient Rome upheld the balcony. At the far end of the giant room held the throne where the King received his courtiers and important nobles from across Europe.

The crowning glory was the hall's magnificent paneled ceiling, painted by Rubens at the first King Charles' request. What sad irony that the king had been executed on scaffolding set just outside the Banqueting House he'd so enjoyed.

Squaring her shoulders, she began the trek through the throngs of people in the direction of the throne and hopefully, the King. The first familiar face she encountered belonged to Edward Hyde, Charles' closest advisor, who'd been in exile with the King almost from the very first. He was a man in his late fifties, his hair more gray than the sandy blonde it had been when last she'd seen him. He was a relic from the old days, dressed in the plain, dark clothing that had adorned courtiers in the time of King Charles I.

"Baron Hyde, what a pleasure to see you again!" She curtseyed before him.

"Isabelle Beaumont! How nice it is to see you. Is your father here with you?" He craned his head around her as though seeking him. Her father and Hyde were like two peas in a pod; both had fought the battle to temper the royalist youth and guide the young King in the right direction throughout his exile. A pity Charles only listened to his advisors sometimes. It was not news that Charles and Hyde had very differing opinions about the appropriate behavior of a young monarch.

"Nay, my lord, I've come alone."

"'Tis Earl Clarendon now, Miss Beaumont."

She gasped, genuinely pleased for his swift rise in rank, because for all his priggishness, he'd stood staunchly by the King this decade

past. “Many felicitations, my lord. When did this happen?”

“Just this past month.”

“Well earned, my lord.” Then she grinned. “I too have recently seen my rank elevated. I am now Lady Royston.”

“Good God, I thought your father was never going to let you go, not even for marriage.” He chuckled as he took her hand, tucking it into his arm. “Maitland is a lucky fellow, I hope he realizes that.”

She avoided making any comments about her husband, for she’d been taught it was better to say nothing than to say something disparaging. And the entire court need not know of her marital problems.

“I assume His Majesty is here tonight?” She changed the subject to the matter of most importance.

“Indeed he is. It is his birthday celebration, as I’m sure you know. There is much making of revelry in his honor, as well as the mad celebration over the beheading of that Scots traitor, Argyll, some two days past.” Distaste laced his voice, whether over the Argyll name or the general mention of the Scots, she didn’t know. “I’ll take you to him, Lady Royston.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, for she’d completely forgotten Charles’ birthday. One year ago on this day he’d ridden into London for the first time in nearly a decade to the cheers and applause of his subjects as they welcomed him home, an exiled king returned. She breathed a sigh of relief Clarendon had reminded her. Now she wouldn’t look the total fool when she faced the King.

A couple put themselves directly into her path and she

recognized the man right away, but though she searched her brain, she could not place the woman.

"Your Grace," Izzy murmured, curtsying to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, even as distaste flared, for this man had been the King's closest friend once, a foster brother, but he'd left Charles in exile to reclaim his own lands whilst the King still lived in poverty in Holland. Yet the King had received him back into his favor, so how could she appear to do less?

Buckingham quirked a brow. "Have we met?" His eyes focused on her cleavage and she snapped her fan with a flick of her wrist, guarding her flesh from his view.

"Of course, Your Grace. I am Isabelle Beaumont."

The Duke grinned lasciviously. "So you are. But much grown since last I saw you."

Clarendon stood stiffly at Izzy's side. "Permit me to introduce you to Lady Palmer" Izzy looked over the beautiful woman just in time to see the woman taking her measure. Izzy had spent enough of her life amongst courtiers to know Lady Palmer was sizing her up to determine whether she was friend or foe.

Lady Palmer was as dramatically beautiful as rumor held, with a long length of thick sable hair that fell to the middle of her back. Her gown was spectacularly decadent in royal purple, her breasts pushed so high they nearly spilled over her neckline. A beautiful collar of amethyst and diamond adorned her slender neck. It was obvious the woman chose her gown and accessories so that all who looked upon her would know she was high in the King's favor.

When Lady Palmer had finished her perusal, she turned to Clarendon, smacking him playfully on the arm with her purple fan. Her voice was deep and husky, “La, Edward. You know I’m now Countess Castlemaine.”

*So this was the King’s favored mistress!* Beside her, Clarendon sucked in his breath with a hiss, and no wonder! The word was Clarendon and Barbara Palmer hated one another with a vengeance. Poor Hyde, only become an earl after years of hard work, while Barbara was now a countess simply by opening her legs for the King. Izzy knew Courtiers referred to her as Charles’ favorite mistress and that zealous Protestant Londoners referred to her as the King’s whore and did not approve of her, especially since she was lawfully married to Roger Palmer, who no doubt reaped plentiful royal rewards by looking the other way as the King dallied with his wife.

A look of amusement crossed Buckingham’s face. “That’s enough, Cousin, no need to rub it in the man’s face.” Then he turned to her, the look in his eyes telling her if she gave him but the slightest encouragement, he would devour her in a moment. “What brings you to White Hall?”

“I’ve recently been wed, Your Grace. As a married woman I’m exercising my prerogative to become reacquainted with the court.”

He waggled his brows at her. “If you need any help at all, I would be more than willing to help reacquaint you.”

As she searched his handsome face, she had no doubt he would. “Many thanks, Your Grace.” She was grateful to feel the squeeze of Clarendon’s fingers on her arm as he led them away.

“Nest of vipers,” he muttered under his breath and she tried to hide a smile.

***

Izzy spent the next hour reconnecting with old acquaintances and being introduced to new courtiers she’d never met before. The Court was abuzz with rumors of the much anticipated marriage arrangement between Charles and the Portuguese Princess, Catherine of Braganza. Most seemed inclined to dislike the would-be Queen sight-unseen, based solely on her Catholicism, but Izzy decided to reserve judgment until she met the woman. After all, she *had* spent most of her exile in France surrounded by royal Catholics at the court of King Louis, and those Catholics included King Charles’ own mother, Henrietta Maria. And it was no secret the King’s brother James secretly leaned Catholic. The King himself was very tolerant of those of the Catholic persuasion, which caused dismay and even alarm by staunch Protestants, whose greatest fear was to see England cast back into the dark days of ‘Popery’. More dismaying, in their somewhat closed minds, Charles’ had yet to sire an heir to the throne, and this left his Catholic brother as his heir, for the moment, and to many a fate worse than death.

When she finally found herself before her monarch, she sank to the ground in a low curtsy. “Your Majesty,” she breathed.

“Isabelle Beaumont!” he said with gruff, genuine affection, quickly pulling her up upright and holding her an arm’s length a way as his gaze traveled to her feet and back to her face. “Look how you’ve grown.” Before she could say anything, he pulled her into his arms for

a crushing hug. When he released her Lady Castelmaine was glaring fiercely in their direction. As if Izzy could ever be a threat to Barbara Palmer's position with the King!

"Come, walk with me." The King tucked Izzy's hand into the crook of his jewel bedecked doublet and led her out a side door, into the magnificent privy gardens of White Hall. She studied him as they walked. He'd always been a handsome man. At a few inches over six feet tall, he towered over most men. With his raven hair and olive complexion, a throwback to his Italian Medici blood, he had the swarthy look of a pirate. Being King suited him well. Even so, the long years of exile and the losses in his family showed markedly in the deep lines etched in his face, though he was only in his early thirties. It had been a hard and painful road to become King.

"What has brought you here, my sweet?"

"Of course I wanted only to personally wish you Happy Birthday, Sire." She lied sweetly.

"What has taken so long for you to come to court? And where is your father, and that beautiful mother of yours?"

"Papa wanted to spend some time in Cornwall, to make sure the estate is recovering from the years of neglect."

The King sighed. "Your family sacrificed so much, little one. If ever there is anything I may do for you, you need only ask."

"Actually, Sire…"

He placed his fingers over her lips. "But not tonight. This evening is a night for celebration. Come to me tomorrow evening in the Presence Chamber, and we can talk about whatever your heart

desires." With that statement, he changed the subject. "Tell me, has your father yet betrothed you?"

Her mind spun. She'd achieved her goal, the King would meet with her, she need only be patient for only a bit longer! Now she could relax and enjoy her evening. Laughter bubbled up inside. "Ah, Your Majesty, he's done more than that. I am a married woman now."

Charles stopped walking and his shrewd gaze studied her face. "And who was deemed worthy enough to receive your hand? Especially without my approval? Your father knew I wished to have you for my own," he teased.

"Why, Your Majesty, are you saying you aspired to make me your queen?"

He squeezed her hand. "Indeed, if I thought for even a moment you wished for a crown, but I know you better than that."

"Indeed, you do know me well, Majesty."

"So, who is this man who has eternally earned my envy and enmity?"

She had to crane her neck to meet his gaze, and smiled. "Lord Royston." She said the name with no small amount of trepidation. Though she thought Ram loyal to the King, Ram had not actually verified such information for her. So relief swept her when Charles' face cleared and he laughed. "Splendid! Ramsay Maitland is a good man. And most importantly, his family has much wealth, which I know your father is in dire need of."

It took quite an effort not to let the statement get under her skin. Marriages were created for the gain of the parties involved, but

she'd rather the world not think she'd been traded away by her father for money.

Charles wagged his raven brows at her suggestively, bringing her attention back to him. "And now you are a married woman, you are most welcome at my court. I do not debauch young innocents, but beautiful married ladies are a favorite pastime of mine." He winked.

"Your Majesty!" She chided with a laugh, though inside she was a little shocked. But he spoke the truth. Roger Palmer certainly looked the other way while his wife Barbara dallied with the King. "You've known me since I was but a child."

"Aye, that I have. And I always said you would grow to become a breathtaking woman. And I am always right in these things." He looked thoughtful. "Though having tended your scraped knees, seduction might prove more difficult. But never let it be said that I am not a man 'up' to the task, especially where a beautiful woman is concerned."

Her cheeks heated as she immediately recognized his ribald joke, and she brought her fan up to cover the evidence. The King threw back his head and laughed. "'Oddsfish, Isabelle, your new husband hasn't served you very well in your boudoir if you still blush at such innocent innuendo!"

He took her arm, leading her back toward the door to the Banqueting House. "If I remember, you had quite a fondness for climbing into my lap and dictating to me how I ought to fight my campaign," he grinned, and so did Izzy. "You should know the Royal Lap is always available to you, should you so feel the need to continue

that habit," he said with an expansive wave of his hand.

Was he joking? He had a reputation as a ladies' man, and what woman wouldn't find a king as handsome as Charles appealing? He already had one royal bastard whom he'd acknowledged, and if gossip served correctly, Barbara Palmer had recently given birth to another.

For the first time, she felt out of her depth at Court. The King has always represented safety to her, but she was married now, so the courtiers would assume she was no longer innocent and would no longer take pains to hide from her the realities that occurred day to day at White Hall. But in actuality, there was so much she didn't know.

She wished Ram were at her side, helping her navigate these precarious waters. Yet the thought made no sense, since she was here to secure an annulment from him.

Pushing thoughts of her blessedly absent husband out of her mind, she smiled at the King as he gallantly ushered her inside ahead of him.

# Chapter 18

The next morning, Izzy hugged her pillow in happy abandon, gloating over her success of the previous evening. One night at White Hall and she'd secured herself a private audience with the King. And in the light of day, his flirtation seemed nothing more than that; playful bantering. Now all she had to do was find something to do to fill the long hours of the day, until it was time to dress for the evening. And ignore the apprehension brought about by the certainty that Ram would discover where she'd fled and arrive very soon.

She took a supply of coins from Ram's desk, summoned Meg to accompany her, and went out during the afternoon. Her diamond and sapphire necklace wouldn't match her green gown, so she had need of jewels. Or at least some glass baubles that could pass for jewels. Her sense of fair play wouldn't allow her to spend hundreds of pounds of Ram's money on real gems when she had every intention of ending their marriage before long, even if he could so easily afford it.

A window display for a shop selling accessories for the fashionable lady caught her attention and drew her within. Delighted to find glass and paste pieces jewelry, Izzy was also enthralled by the various wigs, masks, and makeup on display. Bubbling with mischief, Izzy picked out a mask with feathers colored the most outrageous shade of pink, and, after pretending to admire it, slipped it on. She turned to Meg.

"What do you think? 'Tis incredible, isn't it?"

Meg's eyes widened and her mouth opened, then closed, then opened once more. "I ain't never seen anything like it, my lady."

Izzy broke into giggles and removed the mask. "What a politic answer, Meg! I would have said it was downright ghastly. Although," Izzy stared at the bright pink feathers. "If I wore this, Hawthorne could never again put me in the ladies' receiving room at Chesworth. I'd clash with the entire room!"

Meg clamped a hand across her mouth, but her surprised giggle escaped, and suddenly the two of them were laughing so hard they had to lean on one another for support or risk falling to the floor.

Izzy recovered her decorum when she saw that the shopkeeper wasn't amused. Wiping a tear of mirth away, she moved on to the face paints. At White Halls some of the women had worn so much of the stuff, it had detracted from their looks rather than added anything. Izzy chose only some black kohl for her eyes and a bit of rouge for her lips.

Mollified by her selection, the shopkeeper was more than happy to show Izzy a selection of beauty patches. Izzy made her choice, then moved on to the jewelry.

As soon as she selected a lovely necklace with matching pair of earrings made of green glass very much resembling emeralds, the sky outside the window went dark and rain began to fall. Her day of shopping now cut short by the summer deluge, Izzy clutched her purchases close as she and Meg made a mad dash for the street and clambered into the carriage. They sat in silence as it made its way through the soggy streets of London, back to Ram's house. Her

disappointment was keen, for meandering through the streets and vendors had helped keep her mind off thoughts of Ram's certain fury.

After a light nap in the afternoon, she once again called for Meg and readied herself to return to White Hall. Just putting on her newly transformed gown imbued her with confidence, as she surveyed the results in the mirror. Meg had pulled her hair into an elaborate coif, dressing her curls to hang over her ears with some perfectly placed locks lying against her forehead. The faux emerald necklace and earbobs glittered against the green of the gown and the cream color of her petticoat. The changes Madame Papille's assistants had wrought were incredible, Izzy would never have recognized it as the same one she wore when she'd left home just two days prior. Izzy applied the kohl and rouge sparingly, then placed one beauty patch shaped like the sun on her right temple, to emphasize the slant of her eyes, and a patch shaped like the moon upon her cleavage, where it was sure to draw the eye. She needed every advantage she could gain to win her heart's desire this eve.

Once again she took the Royston carriage to White Hall, filled with more confidence this night than the last. On the way, she rehearsed what she would say to the King over and over in her head. She had to phrase it just right, in such a way he might feel sympathy for her plight, allow his chivalry to override any affection or loyalty for Ram he might have. If there was one thing King Charles II had in spades, it was tender feelings for the fairer sex.

She alighted from the coach and entered the palace, climbing the stairs to the presence chamber, where she waited patiently to be

announced. The first person to place himself in her path was Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper. She gave him a smile as he kissed her hand. “Sir Anthony, it’s a pleasure to see you again.” He was another who had switched sides numerous times throughout the civil wars.

“It’s Baron Ashley now, m’dear.”

“Congratulations are in order then, my Lord Ashley.” *The King has been very busy indeed!* Was there a single man who hadn’t risen in rank since the restoration?

All thoughts of the dark haired, dark eyed Lord Ashley flew from her mind as her gaze locked on the man bearing down on her.

His golden hair hung long to his shoulders. He wore breeches and a doublet in the brightest shade of red she had ever seen, complete with a black hat on his head that contained a feather, dyed the same scarlet shade as the doublet that encased his broad shoulders. She swallowed hard. In all this time, nothing had changed. He was still the most handsome man she’d ever seen.

“Excuse me, my lord.” She murmured to Ashley. If he replied, she never heard it. She stood, rooted to the spot, until Sir Paul Huntley was upon her, reaching for her hands as he came within touching distance.

“Izzy!” He exclaimed, squeezing her fingers. “How lovely you look tonight!”

A hundred questions charged through her mind as she stared into the face of the man she loved. *Where have you been? Why haven’t you come for me? Why could you have not arrived one week earlier?*

But try as she might, she couldn’t form the questions. “Paul.”

She managed to whisper, in a voice that came out husky and low.

His eyes kindled.

“Come out to the garden, Izzy, where we might be private. It’s been such a long time.”

She nodded, dumbstruck, and let him lead her outside. Thoughts of seeing the King fled her mind and all she could focus on was that her beloved had returned, and she was married to another man. Could he ever forgive her? How would she ever be able to tell him?

He led her to a darkened corner, seeking privacy, but they were the only ones who’d ventured outside. He took her hands, pulling them both against his chest.

“How are you, love? How are your parents and your brothers?”

“I-I am well. My family is well too. Papa’s has regained his estates.”

His smile was wide. “You see, *ma petite?* I always told you Charles would be restored and all would be well.”

“Aye. You did.” She ached to ask why he’d stayed away so long, but couldn’t force the words through her constricted throat. All she could do was stare into his beautiful eyes.

“Izzy.” His voice grew husky, his gazed dropped to her lips. “You’ve grown even more beautiful since last I saw you, something I did not think possible.”

She knew with a woman’s instinct he was about to kiss her, yet there was nothing she could do to stop him. It was wrong, yes, and she hadn’t told him she was married, but she’d yearned for this man

for so many long, lonely years.

His right hand slipped around her neck and his left arm swooped around her waist, pulling her flush against his lean body. His mouth came down on hers, devouring, and she stood on tiptoe, wrapping her arms around his neck to kiss him back. She waited for the rush of sensation to overtake her as it did when Ram kissed her, but curiously, there was…nothing. Only slight pleasure as his lips caressed hers. No streaks of heat shot through her body when his tongue slid against hers. Her knees didn't weaken. *Why?* Was it possible Ram ruined her for all other men?

When Paul pulled back, a smile played about his lips. "You have not waited for me, Isabelle. I can tell by the nature of your kisses."

Heat spread across her face. Yet at the same time, anger built, emanating from deep within her. "I never realized I'd be waiting three years, Paul."

He cupped her cheek. "You are angry with me." It was a statement, not a question. "You know I would rather die than ever cause you pain." His fingers brushed her cheekbone in a caress filled with tenderness.

"If you don't remove your hands from my *wife* this very second, you *will* die."

Izzy gasped, jumping away from Paul as Ram's voice invaded the private world she shared with Paul in the garden. *Had he witnessed their embrace?* One glance at her husband's face told her everything she needed to know. His fury was a palpable thing; the air about him

almost throbbed with it.

Her pulse ricocheted in her veins. Why did Ram always have to catch her at the worst moment?

Paul seemed unperturbed. He straightened slowly before turning to face the bristling man behind him. “Royston.” He nodded his head in Ram’s direction, then looked back to her. “So you are now a married woman?”

Izzy looked into his eyes, hoping she could convey to him her sorrow and regret, yet he asked the question with only a mild curiosity that confused her. And of course now Ram knew she hadn’t told Paul of her marriage.

Everything was such a mess.

Ram was at her side in two long strides, sliding his powerful arm about her waist. “We are newly wed, Huntley.”

“Many felicitations to you, then.”

Izzy suppressed the need to scream with impotent frustration. Why was her life playing out as an enormous comedy of errors? She looked from one man to the other, taking the measure of each. The two men couldn’t be more different, with Paul’s golden beauty beside Ram’s dangerous darkness. Both men wore shades of red, though Ram wore black breeches with a deep wine colored doublet over his black tunic. A simple black feather adorned his cap. It crossed her mind that that Paul, in his scarlet apparel, looked like a court jester standing next to Ram, and she gasped at the uncharitable notion.

“Come love, it’s time we retire for the night.” Ram nuzzled her ear, and as furious as he must be with her, of course his only intent

was to antagonize Paul, but she held still. If she showed any distaste in front of Paul, she had no doubt she would suffer for it later.

"'Tis still so early, my lord. May we stay a while longer?" She lowered her lashes and peered at her husband, trying for demure.

It didn't work. Nor was she particularly surprised.

"Nay. I've had a long day and I seek only our bed."

She bristled, but held her tongue. Again, Ram spoke with the sole intent of claiming her as his before the man who stood watching them.

She couldn't leave yet! Paul needed to know everything that had happened. And Izzy burned with the need to discover where he'd been, to find out why he never came for her as promised. And she had yet to see the king.

But it would not be tonight. Tonight there was a reckoning coming.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "I look forward to seeing you again soon, Paul." She risked saying with a quick glance at Ram, noting the tightened muscle in his cheek.

"And I, you, Izzy. Good evening."

Paul went back inside. The only sound on the terrace was that of her harsh breathing.

"Ram"-

"Not a word, Isabelle. We're leaving." His voice rang with warning. Now was not the time to push him.

His hand assumed its regular place wrapped around her upper arm as he led her from the terrace.

***

Ram could feel Izzy trembling beneath his hand. *Good.* She should be afraid of what he might do. She'd led him on a merry chase, and then to top it all off, he'd tracked her to White Hall, only to find her alone on a terrace being pawed by an ex-lover. And not just any ex-lover, but one she claimed to be in love with!

He steered her through the throngs of courtiers, managing to sidestep all invitations thrown their way, and every attempt to draw him into conversation. No doubt Izzy thought they were leaving, but he led her through the meandering, warren-like red-bricked hallways of the palace instead, until he reached a suite of rooms. Unlocking the door, he pushed her inside, then turned to relock it.

"You have rooms here?" Her voice trembled.

After his mad dash from Wales back to Cornwall, he'd rested for a few hours and then left again for London. He'd then proceeded to travel to every place she might conceivably be. He'd visited her father's townhome, surprised not to find her there. He'd come to White Hall earlier in the afternoon, positive that was where she'd be, then grew concerned to find she'd never made use of his personal chambers, nor had the chamberlain plenish a chamber for herself. Stymied about her whereabouts, he'd gone to his townhome in Bishopsgate to rest and think.

When Dexter met him at the door, Ram thought he was hearing things when the butler said, "Welcome home, my lord. My lady will be thrilled to find you've finally arrived."

He'd lost all sense of decorum in his relief. "Izzy is here?" he'd

thundered.

Dexter's brows had creased with confusion. "Not at the moment, but aye, my lord, she's been here for days. She told me you'd be joining her shortly."

He hadn't known whether to laugh or howl. He'd traipsed halfway across the country and back and she'd come to his very own house.

And availed herself of the benefits of being Lady of the Manor. He'd found the bill for her new attire patiently standing on his desk and he'd laughed aloud at her audaciousness. Only his Izzy would be so bold.

He wasn't laughing when Dexter told him she'd left within the hour to spend another evening at White Hall. Barely rested, Ram had changed quickly into court clothing and traveled to the Palace as fast as he was able.

And then he found her with Huntley.

The woman had a knack for bringing out the worst in him. He turned to face her, barely maintaining his temper. "I'm going to tan your arse."

She gasped, her hand flying to her throat. "You wouldn't."

"Oh yes," he shrugged off his doublet and cast it aside. "I would. I shall."

Before she could even open her mouth to reply, he swept her into his arms and sat down on the bed, dragging her face down over his lap. He reached for her skirts, determined to move them out of the way to deliver this well-deserved punishment, despite her frantic

wriggling to escape.

As he bared her bottom, his mouth dried at the sight of her perfectly rounded backside. He heard her hoarse sob and clenched his eyes shut.

"Ram, please. You swore never to hurt me again," she cried.

He dropped her skirts with regret. "So I did." That damned vow would haunt him for the rest of his life.

She struggled to sit, then jumped off his lap and retreated to the far side of the bed.

"Have you any idea the worry you caused me, Isabelle?"

"Because you feared you'd be too late and I'd go to your father before you could stop me?"

"Nay, you little fool!" He stalked around the bed towards her, taking her shoulders in his hands. "I was out of my mind with worry, Izzy! I couldn't find you and I imagined all sorts of terrible things that might have happened to you on the road."

Her lips formed a silent "oh" but no sound escaped. Frustration, relief, and anger churned in him, but her proximity proved too much of a temptation, so he lowered his head, molding his lips to hers. He expected her to struggle, but she did not. She stood still, taking his kiss as though it were a well-deserved punishment.

He would not let her think it so. Sliding his hands into her hair, he angled her head so he could better fit his mouth to hers. His tongue traced the seam of her lips, nipping gently at the lush lower one until she opened to him. His tongue swept inside the moment she did and he felt her first tentative response to him, and it fired his blood. The

kiss changed. Their tongues mated wildly and her arms lifted to reach around his neck.

A part of him knew her response was due to the vulnerability of finding Huntley at court, and he understood and even sympathized with her for the loss and distress the encounter had caused and her need for comfort. The darker side of him was more than willing to use any advantage in the quest to launch a full sensual assault against all her senses. His hands moved down her back, reaching for the delicious backside he almost spanked moments before, and he reveled when she thrust her hips against his, though he doubted she was even cognizant of doing so.

His hands slid round her front, splayed across her chest, dipping down over her low-cut neckline, until he was cupping her breasts through the thin silk of her gown and chemise. His finger stroked the beauty patch she'd so perfectly placed upon the swell of one plump breast, so far gone with desire he didn't care she'd placed it there to draw the eyes of a king. His finger continued lower in a straight line. When he reached the neckline of her gown, he swept his fingertip back and forth across her décolletage, knowing her nipple lay just below the fine fabric and ached for his touch. She arched her shoulders and thrust her chest forward with a whimper, but he continued to taunt her with the light caress, enjoying the contrasting textures of soft skin and silky fabric beneath his finger. She fit herself more tightly against him and he finally gave in, sweeping his finger down, grazing her nipple ever so lightly. She gasped into his mouth and clutched his shoulders. On its return journey upward, his fingertip

found her hardened nipple and circled it, over and over, his touch growing firmer until she writhed against him. Only then did he give her what she really needed, squeezing her nipple between two fingers and kneading her whole breast with his hand.

He was in a frenzy of need. His cock grew so hard, it was almost painful. He slid his hands to her back. Ever so slowly he began to unfasten her gown, until it was loose enough to yank down, until the only barrier between his mouth and her skin was her chemise. He bent his head, taking one hardened nipple into his mouth, sucking it through the soft fabric of her undergarment. She gasped and a moan escaped her lips.

Then, as if she suddenly came to her senses, she jerked away, crossing her arms in front of her to protect herself from his gaze. In the wake of her shyness, he experienced a sudden rush of tenderness and decided not to enlighten her with the truth. It didn't matter what she wore or how well she covered herself. The sight of her naked body was forever imprinted on his mind.

He shook himself out of a haze of arousal. She'd fled from him, intended to seduce a king, and gone out on a darkened garden with the man she fancied herself in love with, and he was rewarding her with pleasure!

Now that the moment had passed, he braced for confrontation.

"What did you think you were doing, Isabelle?"

"What I said I would do! I meant to speak to the King and gain his help to have this marriage annulled. And I still mean to do exactly that!"

“I’m sorry, love, but you’ll not get your way in this. You should seek your bed now, for we leave for Cornwall at first light.”

Her eyes widened with dismay. “Oh, Ram, can we not stay for but a few days?”

He stared in astonishment. “So you can make a fool of me by telling everyone and anyone who will listen that you want nothing more than to end our marriage? Or clap a set of horns on me with Huntley? I think not.”

“The King is expecting me! He promised me a private audience. I must see him or he will worry.”

Suspicion nagged at him. What had she promised to gain an audience alone with His Majesty? Nothing had happened, yet, or she’d have already explained her position to the king, but Ram knew if given the chance, Charles would promise her anything. He was not a man in the habit of denying himself a woman he desired, no matter how high he held her husband, father, or brothers in his regard. The king was never ruthless when it came to women, in fact quite the opposite. He worshipped women and fell easily and often in love, making promises he often couldn’t deliver upon. Ram would die before he allowed Izzy to expose herself to that kind of disappointment.

“’Tis doubtful Charles will worry overmuch, Sweetheart. He’ll hear through the gossip I’ve arrived and assume I can handle any problems you might have from here on out.”

She stamped her foot in that adorable way of hers. “He doesn’t understand *you* are my problem.”

He grinned.

“This is not funny, Ram! I don’t wish to go home yet. It’s a whole new world now that Charles is the rightful King! There are so many new people to meet and those I haven’t seen in years with whom I wish to become reacquainted.”

“Like Paul Huntley?” The stab of jealousy brought on by the name wiped away his smile.

“Others as well, people I’ve not seen or heard from in years! People other than Paul!” She glanced away. “Though I’ll not lie and tell you I’ve no desire to see him. He is my friend.”

“You do realize any kind of relationship with Huntley is out of the question? I know Charles’ courtiers see nothing wrong in the sport of adultery, but I’ll not tolerate it.”

“While we are married, I’d never dishonor you,” she declared so vehemently, he actually believed she believed that.

But he frowned. “This is no place for a lady. Surely you’ve heard how debauched the court has become. I insist we return home.”

“Can I not have a few days of enjoyment before you return me to my prison?” Her eyes filled with frustrated tears and he found he wasn’t unaffected by them, which surprised the hell out of him considering the chase she’d lead him on. She made him feel like a tyrant, when all he wanted was what was best for their life together. Once their marriage was on terra firma, he’d be more than happy to bring her back to London and even Court if she so desired.

An idea crept in, niggling at the back of his mind, refusing to leave him alone, so he contemplated it. He’d be a bastard if he used

her desires to take advantage of their situation, but then rationalized it was better it be he than Charles.

"If I agree to let you remain in London for a few days, you must be willing to do something for me in return."

Her eyes widened, hope flashing through the sky-blue depths. "Of course, Ram. Anything!"

He tried to stifle a triumphant smile, even as he felt like a cad. "If we stay in London, you will share my bed each night we are here… as a true wife."

The hope on her face turned to a dismay he tried not to take personally. He'd been a boor on their wedding night; she had every right to be apprehensive. But they would never move past that night if he didn't force her to it.

"But that's blackmail!"

"Nay, Izzy. It's quid pro quo. I do something for you and in return you do something for me."

Her lower lip began to tremble and he moved to stand before her, lifting her face to his. "I will not hurt you again, Izzy. Have a little faith and trust and we can weather this storm. We *will.*"

She stared into his eyes, hers swimming with tears she refused to let fall.

He waited with bated breath, biting back the urge to take back his offer, if only to remove the desolation from her beautiful face.

"I agree to your terms, my lord."

He stifled any outward show of exultation at her capitulation. Besides, it was a bittersweet victory. Not for a minute did he believe

she wished to remain in London for any other reason than to continue pursuing a way to end their marriage. That she'd agreed to do something that terrified her so much spoke to how wanted badly she wanted to be free of him. He felt a pang of remorse that his actions had led them to this place.

So, instead, he decided to focus on what he stood to gain. This would be a second chance, and a way for him to convince her that their marriage could be a happy, loving one.

He loosened the ties of his shirt.

Her eyes widened. "It is still early yet, my lord."

He flashed a grin. "Not for me, Izzy. I've been across the country twice in search of you. I seek nothing more than a warm bed."

She swallowed hard, and then graced him with a slight nod. With a look on her face as though she were a lamb on its way to the slaughter, she moved resolutely toward the bed.

# Chapter 19

Izzy sat on the very edge of the bed, waiting for Ram to pounce upon her now that she'd agreed to be intimate with him. When he remained standing, watching her with what could only be described as amusement, she stared back, surprised.

She had no patience for his game, whatever it was. If he wanted her in his bed, he would have to get on with it. Swinging her legs onto the mattress, she lay back against the pillows, taking a deep breath. "I'm ready." Her pronouncement sounded resigned, even to her own ears.

His low chuckle raised her hackles.

She gritted her teeth. "May I ask what you find so entertaining?"

Ram met her gaze for a moment, before breaking the stare to walk around the room, extinguishing all candles but one. The result immersed the room in the flickering glow of candlelight that turned everything a reddish shade as it reflected the color of the carpet and furnishings. The chamber, already quite small, felt incredibly intimate in the dim light.

He approached the bed and lowered himself upon it, reclining on the vacant side. Rising up on his elbow, he reached out and toyed with a long tendril of her hair. An instinct to yank her hair away from his grasp rose to the fore as his nearness set off nervous fluttering in her belly. She clamped down on her urge to flee with an iron will.

“C-can we get this over with, my lord?”

He sighed. “Izzy, lovemaking is not a chore to be tolerated in a darkened room while you grit your teeth and count the seconds until it is done. It is a joining of two bodies, two hearts,” he found her hand and laced his fingers through hers, “two souls. I know you understand, for we experienced it at the crofter’s hut together.”

Closing her eyes, she tried to shut out his words. She could not reconcile their glorious stolen moments in the hut with what happened on their wedding night.

He stroked the back of his fingers across her cheek. “I’m not going to make love to you tonight, Izzy.”

Her eyes shot open and the tension in her body began to unwind.

“You’re going to make love to me.”

“What?” She pulled away, struggling to sit up against the headboard. “You said I must share your bed as your proper wife. What game is this?”

“No game, Sweetheart. I’m giving all control to you. You will set the pace. We’ll go as slow as you need in order to feel comfortable. You hold all the power.”

“But I don’t know how!” Even as she made the protest her pulse quickened, remembering how much she’d enjoyed having him in her power when she pleasured him with her mouth.

“The woman who snuck off to Padstow on May Day knew how. Was she more of a woman than the real Izzy? Or is the woman who enchanted me so during those long hours in the crofter’s hut lurking

somewhere deep inside you?"

His words were blatantly sensual, bringing to mind not their wedding night, but graphic memories of stolen hours with Julian, when she'd wanted nothing more than to take him deep inside her and join with him in ecstasy.

Her breath hitched.

His eyes kindled.

She forced her thoughts back to the present. He'd thrown out a challenge. Staring into his eyes, she contemplated her options. Surely, there must be some way to outwit him? Yet nothing came to mind. His steel gaze didn't waver as he awaited her response.

If there was no way to outplay him at his game, then his challenge would not go unmet. She would be woman enough to make love to him, and before she was done, he'd be on his knees begging! She'd make him regret playing games with her!

Nodding her acquiescence, she watched, fascinated, as his pupils dilated.

After the barest hesitation, she slipped to her knees at his side as he lay back against a pillow. Reaching out a tentative hand, she stroked his cheek. The rough stubble that had grown there throughout the day abraded her skin. He turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm gently.

Something about the gesture touched her heart and she closed her hand tightly, as if the kiss were something she could keep. Slow warmth unfurled from her center.

Leaning over him, she lowered her mouth to his. The kiss was

tentative at first, but as soon as he began to return her kiss, she gave herself over to the feel of his lips against hers. She opened her mouth and his tongue slid inside, tracing the contours of her lips, running lightly across her teeth and then slowly tangling with her tongue. More memories sparked, of the days spent with him when he was simply ‘Julian’, and those feelings returned, albeit with some hesitancy.

Without breaking the kiss she threw one leg over his hips so she could have better access to all of him. His arms came up, embracing her, his hands rubbing gentle circles across her back.

Emboldened by knowing she could stop at the merest hint of fear, she explored his body, learning him all over again as though she’d never touched him before. Her hands slid over the taut muscles of his chest, the heat of his skin scorching even through his thin linen shirt. Trailing kisses over his chin and down his neck, she lifted the hem of his shirt, removing her mouth from him only as long as it took to pull it over his uplifted arms and head. With the garment out of the way, she sought his small, flat nipple, and reveled in the harsh groan that escaped his lips as she tongued him. Between her legs there was a sudden hollow ache that she well remembered.

His hands lifted, tangled in her hair as she continued her descent down his body. She splayed her hands flat on his heated chest, drawing them down his torso in a slow motion, fascinated as the muscles of his taut belly dipped in at her touch. He arched beneath her as she drew near the waistband of his breeches and suddenly she was in the mood to tease and taunt. She held all the power, she could

stop their play at any time, and that knowledge lent her courage. And though she knew exactly what he wanted, she would make him wait. She slid her fingers just beneath the waistband, but went no further, much the way he'd tormented her during their first embrace of the evening.

When she braved a glance at his face, his eyes were narrowed, his breathing heavy. As the headiness of control washed over her, hot moisture formed between her thighs.

"Izzy…" His voice rang with warning and she suppressed a smile. He might have been the one to issue the challenge, but it was as hard for him to remain submissive as it was for her to overcome her fear and take the dominant role.

"You said I could set the pace, my lord." Was that really her voice? It sounded so husky.

His head fell back. He clenched his eyes shut with a groan.

She shimmied down his body until she rested at the bottom of the bed. Making quick work of removing his shoes and stockings, she slid back up again. This time she did more than slip her fingers in the waistband of his breeches. She peeled his breeches down, jumping back when his large shaft sprang free before her.

Memories of the pain caused by that organ assailed her, almost overwhelming her desire to be courageous. Closing her eyes, she desperately fought against the fear clawing at the edge of her awareness.

"Izzy." Ram's voice was a soft caress. When she forced her eyes open and met his gaze, she saw gentle understanding reflected back. A

shuddering sigh escaped, taking with it most of her lingering insecurity. How could she fear when he looked at her so? Moving back to safer territory, she reclaimed his mouth.

With a tender touch, he burrowed his hands in her hair, letting long strands of her tresses trail between his fingers to float all around them. His hands moved to her waist and the heat from his palms permeated the layers of her gown and chemise, branding her.

Restless, she shifted against him as he kissed her. Then, like a tiger released from its cage, he sprung into action. His hands swept upwards, cupping her breasts with a sure touch. His thumbs flicked over her hardening nipples and she gasped against his mouth.

His nimble fingers peeled both her gown and shift down to her waist. Disengaging his mouth from hers, he dropped his hands to her waist, lifting her forward so she hung over him. He drew her left nipple into his mouth, alternating between suckling and laving it with his tongue, while he rolled her right nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Heat rippled through her body as he sucked her nipples and she moaned, welcoming the building arousal in her loins and suddenly glad to give up her position of dominance.

Arching upward, she removed her breast from his mouth and slid back, freezing when her backside met his marble-hard shaft. His fingers grasped the hem of her gown and crept upwards, until her gown bunched around her waist, her bare bottom pressed against his hot skin. Her eyes drifted closed as she fought burgeoning panic.

“Lower yourself onto me, Sweetheart, that way you can stop

the moment you become uncomfortable." His hands were now beneath her skirts, sliding up her thighs to probe her hot center. As his finger slipped between her folds, some of the fear receded.

As he toyed with her, she became aware of how very slick she was.

"You're ready for me, love. Can you feel how wet and hot you are?" His voice was no more than a harsh whisper but the words sent little arrows of heat winging toward her core. His fingers found her sensitive bud; her head fell back as the building of her climax began.

Unable to take the exquisite pressure any longer, she rose up on her knees over him, then faltered, unsure as to what she should do next. His hands cupped her backside to lend support. She hovered above him in indecision. Her body screamed in need, yet the pain of their last encounter was still so vivid in her memory.

Need won out. She could stop at any moment, he'd promised. She trusted him not to go back on his word.

Grasping his thick shaft in one hand, she guided him to the entrance of her body. The head slipped inside and she lowered herself onto him ever so slowly, inch by inch.

She heard his harsh breathing as she concentrated on her task, waiting for the pain to come. But then she was fully impaled upon him, and there was no pain. She stared at him in amazement and met his burning gaze. His eyes reflected both tenderness and tension at once.

Moments passed, as she took in the feeling, simply enjoying the sensation of being joined with him. And then;

"For the love of God, Izzy, please, I beg of you, *move*."

His words jolted her out of her stupefaction with a thrill of victory at making him beg as she'd planned, but also with so much more. She rose high on her knees, then lifted herself off of him and back down, over and over again. Each time her body sheathed him, a hoarse cry escaped his lips. The raw sound was so erotic it sent the coiling in her belly spiraling even tighter than before. She began to experiment from her new position of power.

Leaning forward, she placed her hands on either side of his chest to support her weight, and the change in angle did unspeakable things to her as his shaft rubbed harder against her until she gasped and writhed wildly in abandon.

Finally, he took control, and she was glad of it.

His arms reached around her and in one movement, he flipped them, so she lay on her back beneath him. Panic crept in around the edge of her euphoria as she recalled the last time he lay upon her thus, but his long, slow thrusts soon scattered all memory to the wind. Her awareness centered on his body moving against hers, inside hers, filling her over and over again, as if she was made for him.

She clutched at his shoulders as the pleasure built, spiraling tightly within her belly, yearning for the release only he could give her. His thrusts quickened and became harder, until they slid farther back on the bed with every plunge he made into her body.

Just when she thought she could stand no more of the intense pleasure, he lowered his head and suckled her nipple, and it was the catalyst that sent her flying over the precipice. She exploded into

shards of bliss, crying his name over and over again, and felt her fingernails digging into the skin of his arms and her body clenching around his. As shudders wracked her from head to toe, she opened her eyes. Ram threw his head back, neck muscles straining, and erupted inside her with a hoarse cry that sounded like her name.

Languidity stole over her, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and as awareness crept back, she noticed how nice the weight of his body felt upon hers. He had buried his head in her neck and she brought her hands up, running her fingers through his hair in wonder. He turned his face and pressed a soft kiss to her neck.

So this was what it was all about!

But as she lay beneath Ram, thoughts of Paul intruded. Her body went taut. How could she have so enjoyed lying with Ram, when the man she loved was here at court, probably ensconced in a room nearby? Was she that fickle, willing to betray the man she loved for a moment of pleasure? What kind of woman did that make her?

Her euphoria vanished in a trice and hot tears rose in her eyes. She couldn't stop them from spilling onto her cheeks. If she continued to allow Ram to seduce her, she might lose Paul forever, if she hadn't already done so. Yet until she could convince the King to offer his aid in attaining an annulment, Ram had every right to do such things to her. But the more time that passed, the less were her chances of salvaging her relationship with Paul.

When had her life turned into such a disaster?

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Her shuddering body jolted Ram from lazy contentment, and he

lifted his head, stunned to see tears on Izzy's cheeks.

*What the hell?*

He watched her cry, mystified as to what could be wrong. He'd known some women who would cry after an especially powerful orgasmic release, but instinct told him that wasn't the issue here. Not that their union had been anything less than cataclysmic. She had fulfilled every sensuous promise her body had ever made, and never had he experienced such complete fulfillment during the love act. So why then was she crying?

He touched a finger to her cheek, wiping away a tear. "Izzy? Sweetheart, what's wrong."

She shook her head, turning away from his gaze.

"Did I hurt you?" Bemused, he wracked his brain to think of anything that might have caused her distress.

Again, she shook her head, but this time she wrenched her body to the side, a sure sign she wanted his weight off her. He complied, and she curled over to face the wall. He pressed close against her back, draping his arm over her, stroking her arm, trying to soothe.

"What is it?"

"Paul." Her voice came out choked.

He froze. Had she truly uttered the name of her former paramour in their bed, after their lovemaking?

He jerked his arm away as if burned, thrusting himself out of the bed, stung to the core. He had just experienced the most powerful lovemaking experience of his life, and she had the gall to cry over that

peacock, Huntley?

He yanked on his breeches. “Nay, Isabelle. I’m afraid I’m Ramsay, *not* Paul. I’m the one who actually showed up to marry you and am now your husband, remember? It shouldn’t be that difficult to tell us apart.”

Her shoulders shook harder, and he paused in his movements, at a complete loss. His pride stung that she could think of another man after the intimacy just shared. Yet concern over what could be hurting her so overpowered his rage.

Sighing, he settled back on the bed, near her hip. “Do you wish to speak of it?”

He watched the back of her head shake in the negative.

“It might help to talk about what is wrong. Perhaps it isn’t as bad as you think?”

Unexpectedly, she sat up, clutching the sheet over her breasts, staring at him dolefully, her eyes red, her face splotchy.

“I’m an awful person!” Her voice cracked and more tears leaked from her eyes.

Bemused, he stared, at an utter loss. “I’m afraid I am confused. What would possibly make you think that about yourself? We are married. There’s nothing wrong with what we just did.” *It was bloody right, that’s what it was!*

“I’m not upset over *that.*” Even through her tears he could see her roll her eyes. How could she look so unbelievably adorable while behaving in such a maddening manner?

“Then whatever is wrong?”

She released her breath in a quivering huff. “I love Paul! B-but, I love what you and I did too! I’m a sh-shameless, fickle wanton.”

Her proclamation of love for Huntley smarted, but his attention seized on the latter part of her statement. She *had* been as affected by their lovemaking as he’d been, and she felt *guilty* for it. Surely that meant there was a chance for them? He might not have her love yet, but he could enslave her with desire, and perhaps she would come to realize her feelings for Huntley were nothing more than lingering affections from girlhood. Ram would be the one to teach her what it was to be a woman.

He only had to make sure she stayed long enough to come to the realization that she wanted and needed him, and not Huntley.

A good general knew when to advance and when to retreat to do battle another day. Now was the time for the latter.

“Try and get some sleep, love.” He stretched out beside her in the bed, resisting the urge to take her into his arms. “I’m sure all will seem brighter in the morning.”

# Chapter 20

Things did indeed seem brighter in the morning, at least for Ram as he opened his eyes and took in the sight of the beautiful woman slumbering in peace beside him. She was now his wife in every way. *My wife.*

The idea was so strange, yet now he couldn't imagine his life without Izzy in it. Sure, she was a maddening creature, but she had fast become *his* maddening creature.

Rising up on his elbow in order to better study her, his eyes traced the perfect profile presented to him as she reposed on her side, her back towards him. Her lips, usually ready with a sarcastic retort, were relaxed in sleep. Her delicate lashes rested upon her cheek like the finest silk. She looked peaceful.

The lure of her heat and beauty was too much to resist. Inching closer, he curved his body around hers, moving slowly so as not to awaken her. She was all warmth and softness in his arms. Rubbing his nose gently against a strand of hair that lay over her shoulder, he reveled in the unique smell that was *her*.

Her body seemed to relax back against his. What would happen if he stroked her, touched her, and caressed all the spots she found so irresistible?

With light strokes, he slid his fingertips up her arm. Rewarded with a sleepy little murmur that traveled a direct path to his loins, he snuggled closer, his rapidly thickening cock settling between the cleft

of her buttocks.

His hand crept over her arm to cup the perfect globe of one breast. Her nipples, relaxed in sleep, came to attention under the manipulation of his fingers. Her body bucked against his and she stiffened, most assuredly awake in that instant.

Even as she remained tense, she didn't protest his caresses as he continued to stroke her, and then finally, she relaxed, giving tacit approval to his actions. His lips sought the sensitive skin of her neck as his fingers moved to lavish equal attention on her other breast. She moaned and in that throaty sound he knew his battle was won.

Pure heat jolted through his body at the sound. Sliding his hands slowly down her flat belly, his fingers sought the jewel nestled in the springy curls between her thighs. She was wet to the touch and his cock bucked against her as his fingers rubbed in light circles, alternating pressure on the sensitive bud hidden between her folds.

She made incoherent little sounds as she writhed against him, bucking her hips in need, more than ready and already driving him half-wild. He slid one hand under her neck to pillow her head. His other hand ran over her thigh and down her calf, then lifted her leg and levered it back, so it hung over his hip. His nostrils flared as he inhaled her unique, musky scent.

Shifting, he guided his shaft into her welcoming heat from behind. The pleasure as her tight sheath stretched around him as he slowly entered her almost cost him his composure, but holding tight to his control, he recovered.

She gasped, a sound filled with both surprise and delight, and it

was all the urging he needed. He began to move, thrusting slow and hard, then drawing out of her body, only to plunge back in to the hilt. His fingers toyed with her from the front, where he had complete access to every enticing inch of her.

In a matter of moments, she was writhing and moaning in abandon, her fingers grasping handfuls of the coverlet as he continued his slow thrusts without mercy. She ground her backside against him each time he sheathed himself.

Her breathing increased; small whimpers escaped her lips with every movement, which fired his passion to previously unknown heights. He pounded against her, pleased beyond belief when she pressed back against him, circling her hips, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Heat coiled in his balls; he was close to spilling. He sped his motion, manipulating her with his fingers at the same time. He sucked the sensitive lobe of her ear into his mouth and bit gently.

He pressed his mouth against her ear. “Come for me, Izzy.” he urged in a hoarse voice.

Her entire body went rigid with tension and she cried out as her climax took her.

“Ah, God, Izzy!” he gasped. “You feel so damned good.” He rocked his hips, thrusting deep into her sheath, made wetter from her release. His control frayed and he followed her into bliss, exploding inside her, hearing his own ragged cry as he reached exquisite release.

Replete and contented, he lowered her leg to the bed, then drew her close, wrapping her in his embrace. He relished the feeling

of Izzy warm and languid in his arms. He nuzzled her neck, rewarded when she twisted her head to press a soft kiss to his lips.

Not until she turned away did he allow a satisfied grin to pull at his lips.

Oh yes. The first assault on her senses had begun, and he intended it to be the start of a long, drawn out, campaign.

Pressed against her beguiling warmth, her head tucked beneath his chin, he fell into a slumber more peaceful than he'd ever known.

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Izzy lay awake, suffering the same doubts of the night before. There was no denying the pull Ram had on her body, but she didn't blame him for her plight. She cursed her own treacherous body, which even now yearned for him all over again.

She stifled her tears, knowing they were only evidence of self-pity. Who was she to cry over her fate? God had seen fit to send her a man who worshipped her body with his, and, if she were to be completely honest with herself, treated her well. What right did she have to cry because the one man she loved was lost to her, when her lot in life was not so bleak? Many women in her position did not fare as well.

But some of her tears were for Paul, who must feel betrayed and devastated over losing her. He'd gone off to fight a noble cause, expecting to find her waiting when he returned, and here she was, wantonly making love to another man mere hours after seeing him again for the first time in years. How that would hurt him if he knew. Though she no longer feared that life with Ram would be terrible, she

still loved another man. If there was any chance her marriage could be undone, she must take it, for the sake of everyone involved. Ram might not think so now, but eventually he'd come to resent her feelings for Paul, and she'd come to resent him for keeping her from the man she loved. If there was no way to untangle what had been done, so be it, but she at least had to try, to know for sure, or she'd never be able to live with herself.

She lay awake, staring at the ceiling until Ram stirred again beside her. He pressed a soft kiss to the back of her neck, sending shivers ricocheting through her body. She sat quickly, pulling the sheet to her neck, lest he have making love again in mind.

He smiled. "Shall we return to the townhouse today?"

"Nay, Ram. I wish to remain here, at Court. I still haven't had my audience with the King."

In the span of a single instant, his eyes turned frosty. "Why do you still seek an audience?"

She sighed, trying not to take her frustration out on him. "My feelings haven't changed. I'd still like to explore the possibility of an annulment."

Ram sat straight up against the headboard. "After last night, and this morn, you *still* intend to pursue this nonsensical idea?"

"It's not nonsensical, Ram. I'm in love with Paul."

"God Dammit!" He tore from the bed, and faced her, arms crossed over his chest, oblivious to his nudity. "That's the last time you'll bring that man's name into our bedchamber, do you understand? I will not have that peacock tainting the sanctity of our

marriage bed."

"Would you prefer I lie? Do you want me to pretend I've no feelings for him? I gave him my word that I would wait for him, and here I am, married, as if I were some fickle woman who gave no thought to a vow I made and couldn't wait until he'd gone to find myself another man to take his place."

He raked his hand through his hair. "What do you think he did while he was gone? Do you truly believe him faithful to you these last three years?"

She opened her mouth to respond, then paused. She'd never thought about it. If Paul loved her as he'd claimed, surely he wouldn't have taken other women to his bed. Would he? Despite her relative innocence, she'd spent enough time with courtiers of both sexes from many countries, and knew that the quest to seduce and bed one another was a favorite past time amongst the court players. A man would have to either be church minded or truly devoted to another to live celibate for years. She clutched the blanket tighter against her chest. She'd be damned if she'd let Ram see the accusation rattled her.

"He loved me. He asked me to wait for him."

Ram snorted. "The man loves no one more than himself. He may have truly expected you to wait, but I can guarantee he didn't abstain on your behalf."

Grabbing the sheet, she flung herself from the bed, staring across the length of it at her husband. "Do not talk about him like that."

"Isabelle. You are my *wife*. You belong to *me!* How do you think

it makes me feel to hear you wake up with that man's name on your lips and go to sleep thinking of him?"

"You knew! I warned you, I warned my father. I love Paul. Do you honestly think a few pleasurable nights in your bed would change that? Is that the kind of woman you think me to be?"

"I thought you to be a woman of honor, who would respect the sanctimony of marriage. It seems I was very mistaken."

With angry, jerky movements, he pulled on the clothes he'd worn the night before and then turned to face her, the muscle in his jaw clenched tight.

"This is the last evening, Isabelle. Tonight, we return to our own home, and you'll put Paul Huntley behind you."

"That's not fair! You said I could remain here if I shared your bed as a wife in truth!"

"Never did I say for how many days that would be. I suggest you make the most of your time with the court this evening, for you'll not be returning here for some time." He strode toward the door.

"I hate you!" She screamed at his back. He flinched, but didn't stop until he'd exited the chamber and slammed the door behind him.

Izzy spent the morning lying in bed, trying to figure out what her next action would be, all the while hoping Ram would return so she could apologize for her harsh words. He didn't deserve them. She tried to put herself in his shoes and imagine how it would feel to have one's spouse constantly declaring one's love for another.

But that still didn't change her feelings for Paul. She was

trapped. She could never use the knowledge of what Ram had done during the interregnum against him by threatening to tell his father. First, she respected the risks he'd taken immensely. Second, knowing what it was like to be at odds with her own father, she couldn't cause him the same pain.

*Paul*. Surely, he would know what to do! She would speak to *him* and perhaps he'd devise a better solution for the problem. He was far worldlier than she, he must know of some way she could achieve her ends without betraying Ram.

She always felt bolder with a firm plan in place, and now was no exception. With a firm goal in mind, she set to getting dressed. With no choice but to put on the gown she'd worn the evening before, she donned it as quickly as possible. Braiding her hair into two sections, she piled them on her head, using the discarded pins from last evening to hold them in place. Then, taking a deep breath, she left the chamber in search of Paul. Hopefully she wouldn't cross paths with Ram on the way.

Making her way to the large hall where hundreds of courtiers took their meals, she breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't spot her husband.

She did immediately spy her quarry, seated between two beautiful women, both of whom leaned in close, far closer than necessary, hanging on every word he said. She smiled sadly. Once, she'd have been at his side just like those women. But she'd always known someday Paul would be hers, while those women did not.

Ram's words reverberated in her head, and her smile turned to

a frown. Had Paul remained faithful all these years, or did he have women hanging on him every place he went? And did he seduce those women or let himself be seduced by them?

She shook the thought from her mind. It didn't matter now, for she could hardly claim to have been faithful to him. She approached on quiet feet and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Izzy!" Paul's face lit when he recognized her and his blue eyes danced merrily. "Come and sit down. Join us."

Both women shot her looks brimming with venom. Best not stay and antagonize them. She needed no enemies at court, not when dealing with Ram was difficult enough.

"I must speak with you, Paul. Will you spare a moment?"

He placed his hand across his heart. "For you, Izzy, I can spare anything."

He bowed to his dining companions and excused himself, rising from his seat at the trestle table. She walked at his side in silence, until they found themselves outside in the privy gardens. When she was certain they were alone, she turned to him.

"Why the sad face, Izzy?"

"Oh, Paul, you've always known me so well."

He chucked her under the chin. "Whatever it is can't be so terrible as all that."

She paused. He certainly didn't *look* like a man wracked by devastation. In fact, he appeared as he always had; charming and flirtatious, without a care in the world. Shouldn't he be more upset about her marriage? What if Ram was right and there was no reason

for him to be devastated because he didn't love her anymore? Damn Ram for putting these doubts in her mind!

Suddenly uncertain about her course of action, she blurted out the words anyway "I need to discuss my marriage with you."

"Aye, I nearly forgot. Congratulations are in order. When did the happy event occur?"

"Less than a fortnight ago. And I assure you, it was hardly a happy event."

"An arranged marriage then?" His gaze grew speculative. Would it please him to know she'd fought tooth and nail to avoid it? Would it make it a less bitter pill to swallow that she'd not gone blithely to another man's bed?

"Aye. Papa needed money. And Viscount Royston's family is incredibly wealthy."

"Can't say I'm surprised. Half the nobles in this country are desperate for funds. I can't blame your father for his decision to marry you to a parliamentarian, either." They continued to stroll through the gardens in silence. "I'm sure he squeezed quite a few concessions from Chesworth for the honor of your hand."

*But do you blame* me*?* "Paul, I want you to know I did everything I could think of to avoid the marriage. I- I didn't want this, not at all."

"Of course you didn't, Izzy. It's certainly no fault of yours. You are a mere pawn in a game much larger than yourself."

Relief swamped her. "Then you will help me?"

He started, his countenance suddenly one of confusion. "Help

you do what? How can I help? Has he mistreated you?"

She thought of her wedding night, but she could never tell Paul about that. It would only enrage him. And certain things were never meant to leave the bedchamber.

"I've come to London to determine if there is any possible way to obtain an annulment with the help of anyone, even the King if need be."

"That's audacious of you. And your husband has allowed this? Is he insane?"

*Insane*? Shouldn't Paul be delighted if Ram was actually in favor of a separation? "Of course not!" She snapped. "I came here without his knowledge."

"You've not changed at all." His words were spoken ruefully, and yet Izzy was sure she heard an undertone of disapproval, too. Suddenly she was lost, cast adrift in a harbor where once she'd felt only safe and secure.

"Have you considered the stigma a divorce would cause to you and your family? And have you any grounds upon which an annulment might stand?" He peered closely at her and heat rose in her face.

"Nay."

Paul laughed. "Well, at least the man can do *something* right."

Izzy bristled at his mockery of Ram, but she counted to ten and willed herself to remain calm. Paul was the only man who might help her. She needed him to guide her in this.

"Our wedding night doesn't matter—" Paul shook his head but

she rushed on. “It doesn’t, because I’ve come into the discovery of very sensitive information which may be useful in convincing my husband that an annulment would be in our best interest. ‘Tis only that I don’t know what to do with the knowledge, how to use it.”

That instantly piqued his interest. “What do you know?”

“I know that though his father, Chesworth, was a staunch supporter of Cromwell, Ram himself worked for the King.”

“And his father doesn’t know this?”

She shook her head.

“Blackmail, eh, Izzy?” He stroked his chin. “I must admit, I never would have guessed you had it in you. But there you go. You have your answer, you don’t need me. Threaten to go to his father. If Royston fears disinheritance, it should be all you need to gain his agreement on the matter.”

“That’s just it, Paul. I did threaten to do that and it didn’t even faze him! He must think I’m bluffing. And truly, I am, for I cannot possibly go to the Earl with what I know. I respect what Ram did far too much. You know what he risked to jeopardize himself that way.”

Paul sighed. “It’s the only chance you have at convincing him to grant you an annulment. The King will not help you if he thinks for a moment the Viscount is content with this marriage. Not if he knows Maitland is his man.”

“I can’t do it,” she whispered, miserably.

“Oh, Izzy. I wish there were something I could do to help, but there isn’t.” He turned to her, and cupped her face in her hands. “But I do hope it will be me you choose to come to when you need an escape

from your husband. I shall always willingly offer you comfort and companionship, you know that."

"But I want more than that." *I want you!* Despair threatened her composure. She'd been so certain Paul would know what to do to help her. To help *them*.

"You know I wanted you to wait for me. But even so, I still want you, and I can see you whenever you come to London, love."

She took his meaning right away and stared at him in shock. "N-Nay. I'll not break my marriage vows."

He shrugged. "Everybody does it." His breath feathered across her face. "There's no shame in it, especially in arranged marriages. People marry for gain and have affairs for pleasure. You know I've desired you for years." He brushed a strand of hair off her cheek. "I should have been the first man in your bed."

Her fortitude faltered under the words. "It would be wrong."

His arms slipped around her as his mouth took possession of hers roughly. One hand burrowed into her hair, pulling at the neat plaits she'd worked so hard to achieve. His tongue forced its way into her mouth, and she drank in the taste of him, the feel of him…so different from Ram. And not in a good way!

She tore away, turning her back to regain her composure, placing the back of her hand against her mouth. How could it feel so wrong to kiss a man she'd loved for so long? She cast around, frantic for an answer.

Paul's arms came around her from behind, pulling her back against his solid chest. "How could that be wrong?" He nuzzled her

ear, his voice husky with need.

Not knowing how to answer without giving offense, relief swept her at the sound of a cough that was loud enough to interrupt them. That is, until she looked up into Ram's blazing eyes. His gaze raked her from head to toe, narrowed on her mussed hair, then he turned calmly to the man who had wisely taken a step back from her.

"Will you excuse us, Huntley?"

One moment Paul was there, behind her, and in the next moment he was gone without a single word, leaving her to face her furious husband alone.

# Chapter 21

Ram took deep, calming breaths, fighting the urge to strike his erstwhile wife. He'd never in his life beaten a woman, but then again, he'd never before been so angry at a woman either. It would seem he'd gotten the exact type of woman he'd always sought to avoid. A woman very much like his mother, and he'd done it to himself. How ironic.

"Is this to be our future then, Isabelle?" he asked quietly. "Will I forever enter a room, a darkened corner, a secluded garden, to find you making love to Huntley? And when you tire of him, will it be some other young buck who strikes your fancy?"

She cried out. "It's not like that Ram. I- I didn't ask for what he did."

He snorted. "All last evening and this morning you've cried over that man incessantly, claiming an intent to gain an annulment so you can be with him, and I find you, less than two hours since we shared a bed, and for the second time in a matter of days, in his arms- and you expect me to believe you didn't crave his attentions?"

He didn't give her a chance to answer. "Gather your belongings, we're going back to the house, and tomorrow we return to Cornwall."

"You said we could remain at court this evening." Anguish filled her voice.

He flinched. Even now, her concern for a missed opportunity to

see the King overrode any worries she might have about the tenuous state of their relationship. “And so we will. But I won’t leave you to your own devices here all day. We’ll return to the house and come back *together* in the evening.”

Relief filled her eyes, and it gutted him.

He walked behind her, simmering with anger and hurt, as they navigated their way out of the privy garden. He’d truly believed that last night and this morn they’d made a start on a new life. Apparently, he was a fool.

The anger he could handle; he’d been angry before, *especially* with Izzy. But the hurt disturbed him to his very core. Because it could only mean one thing.

*How had he let himself care so deeply for this woman?* He’d known what she was before he married her, but he’d gone through with the wedding anyway, in the vain hope she’d come to her senses and realize what a good match they made. And not only because her family connections would help his father, or because her father needed money and land. They had an almost unnatural attraction between them, a physical pull to one another, a shared sense of humor, and an ability to converse on any subject— all the good things he believed went into a strong marriage. And Lord God, for all of that, he’d allowed himself to love her. The fucking irony of it was the hardest to bear. It was precisely because of her sexual inexperience that she didn’t know how rare what they shared was and how lucky they were in their compatibility.

Now he’d been sucked into a lopsided competition, one he

could never hope to win. Izzy loved an idealized version of a man who didn't exist and never had. When she discovered Huntley's true character for herself, as she likely would someday, and decided she wanted to remain his wife, would it mean anything? Or would Ram only ever be her second choice?

And what if she never discovered Huntley's true nature? Could Ram remain in a sham of a marriage, despite his feelings for her? If Huntley were a different sort of man, Ram might consider granting the annulment she so desperately wanted, for he only wished for her happiness, especially in light of the harm he'd caused her. But Huntley would bring her nothing but misery, and Ram would not have a hand in creating such a life for her.

He stared at her back as she walked before him. Her shoulders slouched, her head bowed downwards. Not like the Izzy he knew. She seemed defeated.

He understood the feeling.

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Izzy bit her lip to hold back tears. She'd never meant for things to go so far with Paul. Not until she was no longer another man's wife. It wasn't right, and she'd hurt Ram with her actions. Regret sat like acid in her stomach.

He didn't speak during the carriage ride home. When they reached the cobbled entry way and came to a stop, he climbed out, then gave her his hand to help her down the steps. It was a perfunctory gesture, lacking any warmth.

Dexter seemed delighted to find them, together at last, but she

couldn't bear to face the butler. Pleading an aching head, she scurried up to her bedchamber. Two more gowns had been delivered and awaited her in the wardrobe to be tried on. She couldn't even gather the interest to look at them. Instead, after she'd undressed and pulled on a dressing gown, she flopped onto the bed, throwing her arm over her eyes.

Moments later, she heard Ram moving within the adjoining chamber. Should she go to him? A knot had formed in the pit of her belly. Did he think less of her now than he'd done this morning? She ached to reassure him she was no wanton.

She fixed her mussed hair, then went to the door separating them. Such a thin piece of English oak, yet in truth she and Ram were worlds apart. She wished with her whole heart it was not so.

She rapped upon the door and opened it before he bid her entry. Ram sat on the edge of the bed wearing only his breeches, holding his head in his hands. Her heart lurched.

He looked up at her approach. "What do you want?" His voice sounded defeated, not angry as she expected. Crossing the room in three quick strides, she stood before the bed, and then knelt on the floor so she could take his hands. He didn't resist, but nor did he squeeze her fingers in response.

"I'm so sorry, Ram. I never meant for any of that to happen."

"You never mean for anything to happen. It just does with you, Izzy. You're a walking disaster. And now, because of a moment of utter madness, you're my disaster."

For the first time when speaking of their marriage, regret

tinged his voice. A knot of anguish settled in her stomach while panic churned it. She didn't want him to regret marrying her. This would all be so much easier if he was the ogre she initially imagined when Papa first told her of his plans to marry her to a faceless roundhead. It would be easier if she'd been able to hold tight to her anger over their wedding night. If she hated him, she'd walk over him to get what she wanted and never even look back. Instead, she liked and respected him more each day. Nay, even worse, she cared about him, because each day she recognized in him more and more the man she'd known as Julian.

She was so very confused. Ram wasn't the man she loved, and yet she wanted nothing more than to climb into the haven of his arms to be comforted, despite Paul's reappearance in her life. And Paul had not given her the slightest bit of comfort, when she'd need it more than anything. It made no sense at all!

What if Belinda was right? What if Izzy *didn't* love Paul anymore, at least not in a romantic way?

She opened her mouth, but not knowing what to say, closed it again.

After a few minutes of contemplation, she tried a different approach. "I don't mean to be difficult, or cause you grief. You seem to catch me at my worst moments." She grinned ruefully, hoping he would see the humor of the situation, but he studied her with a serious mien, his grey eyes clouded.

Obviously, it would take more than pretty words to convince him. Springing to her feet, she settled in his lap, looping her arms

loosely about his neck. Her backside made contact with the hardness in his breeches that cried his desire for her, no matter what he might say or how angry he might be, but he didn't put his arms around her.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to make things better, Ram. Please, tell me how to do that!"

He raked his fingers through his hair, but didn't dislodge her from his lap. "You claim to love another man. How can you come to me so easily, if you love Paul as deeply as you claim? Tell me, Izzy. Explain it so I might understand."

She had no answer, for she couldn't even explain it to herself. All she knew was that she couldn't bear to be the cause of Ram's dissatisfaction and regret. She *wanted* to matter to him.

He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he swept her into his arms and laid her face down on the bed, then urged her onto her hands and knees. "I'll make this easier for you, Isabelle. Would you like that?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to protest the use of her full name, which never boded well, but his lips were warm on the nape of her neck. Words failed her. He could call her whatever he wanted if only he continued to do such wondrously wicked things to her body.

He reached around her front, untied the sash of her dressing gown, then slid the garment over her shoulders and off. Though anticipation and the chill air of the room made her shiver, the scrap of silk slithered down her body with a rustle that fired her blood, chasing away the cold.

She tried to roll over onto her back, to look him in the eyes and stroke him in return, but he stopped her with a hand at the base of her spine. His lips returned to her neck, his tongue sought out the sensitive skin behind her ears. She moaned.

All the while, his hands massaged her back, fingers slipping to her sides, lightly stroking the swell of each breast. She wanted him to play with her breasts fully, not merely toy with them, so she arched up on her hands to allow him better access.

He accepted the invitation without hesitation. He cupped a breast in each hand, his thumbs swirling around the sensitive skin that surrounded her nipples. She wanted to demand he touch her where she needed it, but instead a throaty moan escaped her. At the sound, his fingers latched on to her nipples, tugging and rolling them between his fingers. His mouth remained on the back of the neck, and he began to lick downwards. Hot flames of desire snaked through her, settling hot and moist between her legs.

She tried rolling over again, but the weight of his body against hers held her immobile, and she whimpered, able to do naught but clutch the silken bed sheets in her fists.

As his tongue journeyed down her spine, his hands followed a path downwards in the front, caressing the underside of her breasts, then slipping over her belly, coming to rest above the juncture of her thighs, where his fingertips just brushed the mound of curls, placing the slightest pressure. His hands went no lower.

A frustrated sound escaped her lips. She wiggled her backside to convey that he should continue, and was rewarded with a husky

chuckle that curled her toes.

"You're an impatient little thing, aren't you?"

Her response was lost when his tongue swept across the cleft of her backside, barely grazing her skin. She drew in a harsh breath at the sensation.

His lips suddenly feathered against her ear. "Before I'm through with you I'm going to teach you to love the anticipation nearly as much as you love to be fucked."

She frowned at his choice of words, but thoughts failed her when his hands resumed their wandering. He slid them to her hips, lifting her backside even higher.

She'd never felt so vulnerable in her life, exposed to him on her hands and knees. But all thought fled, like grains of sand blown by the wind, as his mouth resumed its wicked exploration. Once more he drew his hot tongue down the cleft of her posterior, but this time he went deeper and didn't stop. His mouth continued to the juncture of her thighs, lapping at her as if she were a delicacy, tasting parts of her she'd never dreamed possible. Over and over again his tongue made its journey, from the small of her back, to the aching flesh between her legs, until she almost cried tears of need.

Once more she tried to turn over, but he held her firmly in place.

"Ram," she panted, "What are you doing?"

"I'm making this easy for you, love. Relax."

She felt him stand upright, heard the rustling sound as he removed his breeches. His hands returned to her hips, pulling her back

until her knees rested at the edge of the bed. His erection, hard and hot, throbbed against her.

"I don't understand," she uttered through the haze of passion engulfing her.

The head of his shaft slid slickly through her swollen folds, pressing harder and harder against the sensitive bud hidden at the juncture with every pass, then probed the entrance to her body. "There's no need to fight a battle with yourself over your desires." He slid forward slowly, stretching her tight flesh in tiny increments.

She quivered.

"While I take you like this, you can fantasize to your heart's content that Huntley is the man fucking you. You can pretend it's his hands stroking you, his cock pulsing deep inside you." He thrust once. "You were in his arms only an hour ago, yet now here you are in my bed. What you need is obvious."

"What! Ram, nay! That's not what I want." She tried to twist away.

"Don't deny it, Izzy and don't lie to yourself." His voice was suddenly flat, devoid of emotion.

She tried to rise, but his hands at her hips held her immobile. Frustrated, she cried out. "But I *don't* want-"

She gasped, cut off mid-sentence by another strong thrust that seated him to the hilt inside her. The protest died on her lips at the overwhelming pleasure and she moaned, lost in the sensation of his thick length filling her so completely.

His hands gripped her hips, pulling her back to meet every

forward thrust. Within moments she took over the motion herself, grinding her backside hard against him each time he sheathed himself. She'd never experience anything so exquisite before.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," were the only words she could muster as he continued the assault on her senses, sending her flying higher and higher, until she knew she must either shatter or die of the pleasure.

Her climax came upon her suddenly. Her muscles clenched hard around him as she shattered into a million pieces. Fire traveled outwards from her loins until she existed of nothing but flame. For one glorious moment, only the pure pleasure coursing through her filled her mind. She gasped, tearing at the coverlet in a frenzy.

A hoarse gasp escaped through Ram's teeth as he thrust against her, faster and harder, pressing himself deeper and deeper inside She felt the hot spurt as he spilled his seed. The scalding heat plunged her over the edge once more, and she rode the smaller climax that came on the heels of the larger one.

When her mind finally cleared, she'd collapsed full length on the bed, limp with satiation and exhaustion. Ram lay atop her, bearing his weight on arms that rested by her shoulders.

The memory of his bitter words and accusation destroyed the beauty of what they'd just shared. She stiffened beneath him, closing her eyes in defeat. Did he truly believe she could ever fantasize about Paul or any other man while Ram made love to her? *How could he?*

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Ram felt her body tense beneath his. He rolled off her to lie at her side, throwing his arm across his eyes as he struggled to catch his

breath. He warred with the emotions within himself over what had just happened.

Despite his intentions when he took her to bed, he'd just experienced some of the most incredible, most exciting lovemaking of his life, and the woman with whom he'd shared it had pretended he was another man. There was no other explanation for her wild response once he'd granted her permission to fantasize he was Huntley. He hadn't heard the cry of his own name on her lips once.

He swallowed hard. He had to let her go. Now he knew without a doubt he couldn't spend his life with a woman who wanted someone else. It was far too painful and he deserved far better.

He wouldn't touch her again, would have to wait until he knew for sure she hadn't quickened with his child. If she hadn't, he would release her from their marriage. To give her up might devastate him, but to keep her would destroy him.

Now that he'd made up his mind, it was time to begin withdrawing from her, before his emotions became more entangled than they already were. He'd send her back to Cornwall while he remained in London. He'd reclaim his old life, and soon, all would be back to normal. His father would just have to make do with the goodwill his actions during the interregnum had gained with King Charles.

He removed his arm from his eyes and met Izzy's angry gaze.

"Don't!" he warned.

"How could you?" she demanded. She looked more like a flawless porcelain doll than a woman, her cheeks still flushed from her

climax, her glorious hair tumbling about her shoulders in wild disarray.

He grunted in reply.

“How could you even suggest something so absurd and so insulting, Ram!”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Izzy.”

“But I do! Surely you cannot possibly think-”

“I don’t *think*. I know.”

“Then you know nothing!”

“Then that makes two of us!” he sat up. “We should get dressed for the evening, no? It is your last chance to be granted an audience by the King. You don’t want to keep your beloved monarch waiting.”

She stuttered in reply, but he continued as he hauled himself off the bed. “I’ll dress and meet you in the foyer in, say, an hour?”

Without waiting for a reply, he yanked his breeches back on, then went to his wardrobe, staring at the varied options before him. What should he wear for what was sure to be a long and miserable evening?

She finally took the obvious hint that he had no wish to converse with or even look at her and slunk back to her chamber, slamming the adjoining door behind her. The moment she did he leaned his forehead against the wood of the wardrobe, drowning in dismay.

# Chapter 22

It was a tense and silent ride to White Hall. The last thing Ram was in the mood for was to be feted and fawned upon by the King's lackeys. Especially since he recognized the look in Izzy's eyes that made it clear she intended to take her anger out on him if she found an opportunity.

And the best way for her to do that involved Paul Huntley, who would likely be present this evening.

He hated that he already knew her so well in such a short time that he could read her mind. He also knew she never acted with malicious intent. When she was hurt or believed someone wronged her, she acted without thought. While he doubted he had the capacity to hurt her in any way other than physically, his earlier behavior toward her was entirely offensive. He'd treated her with a complete lack of respect when he'd taken her to bed and he was sorry for it, though deep down he couldn't regret it. Their afternoon romp had forced him to a decision about a crucial matter that might have taken him weeks or even months longer to arrive at if not for what he'd done. In the long run he was saving himself unnecessary heartache.

Tonight he'd pay the price for that convenience, without a doubt.

He studied her. She sat across the carriage, studiously avoiding any eye contact with him. She'd given him the silent treatment since she'd slammed out of his bedchamber earlier that evening.

She was a vision of loveliness in her new indigo gown delivered just that day. Her chestnut hair glowed next to the vivid jewel-tone of the fabric and the sapphires at her neck reflected in the blue of her eyes. She took his breath away.

His heart lurched.

She might be wearing his ring on her finger and his gems at her throat, but she'd never truly be his.

In his frustration he wanted to punch something, yet there was no one to blame but himself. He'd known going into this where her affections lay, yet still he'd persisted. And then he'd irrevocably ruined everything on their wedding night.

Should he tell her he'd decided to end the marriage? If he told her he would grant her an annulment so long as she hadn't quickened with child, she would keep her distance from his bed. If he didn't tell her- well who knew? Izzy was a woman with very physical needs, and as her behavior earlier in the day proved, she wasn't averse to taking advantage of their situation to gain her own satisfaction.

Part of him hoped she already bore the fruit of their lovemaking. Then she'd be honor-bound to remain his wife, and he honor-bound to care for her.

Did he want to keep her for only that reason?

The answer his mind returned was a resounding *Nay*.

Either she wanted him for who he was, or they'd go their separate ways. His decision from earlier would stand. If she wasn't pregnant, the marriage would end.

The sounds of voices and horses wafting through the night

brought his attention to their arrival at White Hall. Turning, he found Izzy's eyes upon him, watching him with a contemplative look upon her face. What was she thinking, and did he truly want to know?

He leapt from the carriage, turning to take her hand to help her descend.

As usual, the court thronged with people ever eager to dance attendance on the King. John Maitland, Earl of Lauderdale caught his attention, grinned widely, and clapped him painfully hard on the shoulder "Och, laddie, How've ye been?"

Ram grinned as he took in the sight of the corpulent Scot with the bright red hair standing up wildly. Everything about the man was coarse and uncouth, and Ram liked him all the more for it. One had to respect a man who carried no shame for his origins. "Uncle John," he used the title with exquisite sarcasm "you're looking well."

The Earl snorted. "A hell of a lot better than the last time ye clapped eyes upon me, that's fer sure."

When they'd last crossed paths, the earl had been imprisoned in the Tower of London. Lauderdale had been one of the most influential Scots during the civil wars, and a strong supporter of the Presbyterian cause in Scotland, a Covenanter. After the elder King Charles' execution, Lauderdale switched his allegiance to the young Charles and ended up in the Tower as a Parliamentary prisoner after the Battle of Worcester.

Ram had used their common surname, though they were no relation as far as either knew, to visit the prisoner. Outwardly, it had seemed to the government that Ram was using his influence to turn

Lauderdale's allegiance back to the Parliamentary cause. In reality, he'd used the visits to discuss ways to bring to heel the Scottish support that had been promised to Charles, in his bid to retake the throne. Ram would then report any progress to the monarch.

Ram remembered his manners at that precise moment, when a glance at Izzy revealed her confusion.

"Allow me to introduce you to the Earl of Lauderdale. Lauderdale, this is my wife, Isabelle."

"So ye got yerself leg-shackled, did ye laddie?" Even as he uttered the statement, the man's sharp eyes peered down the bodice of Izzy's gown. Lauderdale was a man who enjoyed his food, his wine, and his women, all to a great extent. Despite Ram's decision regarding his marriage, he stiffened as the Scot continued to ogle Izzy quite openly.

"Please excuse us, my lord. I see some people we must greet."

The Earl continued to watch Izzy, eyes lit with speculation. "Aye. But ye must join me for a proper supper one of these days. I'll no' take no fer an answer."

With an ambiguous nod, Ram led Izzy away by the elbow.

"A relation of yours, my lord?" She asked when they were well out of earshot.

"Sorry to disappoint, but you cannot claim connection to the powerful Earl of Lauderdale through marriage, Isabelle."

Her eyes kindled with annoyance. "I was only about to mention that boorishness must run in the family. But you must have come by yours from a different source."

His fists clenched. How could she so easily drive him to want to commit violence?

Just as he was about to fire off a taunt of his own, a hand on his shoulder startled him. “Is that Ramsay Maitland, or do my eyes deceive me?”

Ram spun around to find his oldest friend standing before him.

“Lucien!” Ram embraced him briefly. “What brings you to White Hall?”

“Ah, the same old routine now that order’s been restored. Wine, women, and song.” His gaze slipped to Izzy. “And not necessarily in that order.”

Ram’s possessive instincts rose just as they had when Lauderdale had looked at her that way, because Lucien was charming, handsome, and debonair…well more of a threat then Lauderdale would ever be.

Ram recognized the slow grin of appreciation that lit Lucien’s face. “Your new ladybird is lovely,” he proclaimed. “You must be fresh to the court market, my sweet, for I would have never forgotten you had we met.” He took her hand and kissed it.

Izzy gasped and jerked her hand back while Ram choked back a laugh.

“Lord Lucien De Vere, allow me to present to you my wife, Isabelle Maitland. Darling, this is my oldest friend, Lord Lucien.”

Lucien’s green eyes widened in surprise, but he quickly recovered his decorum. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady Royston. Please excuse my gaffe; I never imagined my old friend here would

ever get himself leg-shackled."

Ram wrestled back a grin. That was twice in a matter of five minutes someone had referred to his marital state as "leg-shackled" in front of her. She could not be well pleased.

"And you, my friend? No wife yet?"

Lucien snorted. "That's for my brother to suffer. I'm just the spare. And in light of that I've deemed it unnecessary to shackle myself in that most unholy of sacraments."

"Oh, for God's sake, Ramsay. I see Countess Castlemaine. I'm going to give her my regards."

Ram had to bite his lip to keep the laughter from escaping. No one could fail to notice the annoyance and exasperation in her tone.

His humor fled and for a moment, jealousy clawed at him with sharp talons. An insidious voice in his head wondered if she'd really spotted Huntley and that was her reason for running off. He forced himself not to follow the direction of her gaze.

It didn't matter. If she wanted that peacock, he wouldn't stand in her way.

"Easy on the wine, my love. You know how it goes to your head."

She glared at him with the ice of a winter storm, turned on her heel and stalked off.

"Prickly one you've got there, though I'll grant you, she is a beauty."

He turned back to his friend, shaking his head. "Not my choice," he grunted, knowing he told a half-truth.

“Ah.” Lucien shuddered in commiseration. “The Earl decided it was time, did he?” When Ram nodded, Lucien laughed. Then his mien turned serious.

“Your father never learned of your participation with the Royalist Cause?”

Ram motioned to a servant to bring him a goblet of wine. Lucien was the only person he’d ever told about his secret missions. “Nay, thank God.” Then, reconsidering, he downed the remainder of the drink in one swallow. “On second thought, perhaps he did, and marrying me off to Izzy is my punishment.”

Lucien laughter was warm, it had always attracted friends and lovers to him for as long as Ram could remember. Physically, they’d always strongly resembled one another, both with dark hair and similar builds, though Lucien’s eyes were vivid green to Ram’s gray, and Lucien had a cleft in his chin the women seemed never able to resist. In their youth, they’d oft pretended to be brothers in order to perpetuate some prank or another. But Ram had always been more serious minded than his fun-loving friend, who as a second son, didn’t shoulder the burden of a family heritage. Many times in the past, Ram had envied his friend his ability to live an unfettered life of freedom, and his ability to find humor in almost any situation. He often teased Ram into the realization that he’d taken something far too seriously, while in return Ram had often stopped Lucien from some of his more outrageous decisions. They’d traveled together, drank and wenched together. Ram, never having had a brother, considered Lucien the closest thing.

“Are you back in London to stay?”

Lucien shrugged. “For the time being. Until the next great adventure comes along-”

He stopped speaking at the same moment Ram felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and his eyes widened to find Belinda standing before him.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, my lord.”

“Miss Spencer? What brings you to London?” Dressed for an evening at court, she seemed almost transformed. Her dark blonde hair, usually pulled back in plain, unflattering hairstyles, was swept up, leaving tendrils to cascade down her slender neck and about her shoulders. The up-tipped nose, so similar to Izzy’s, was dotted with a sprinkling of freckles. Her serious blue eyes, also like his wife’s, were trained on him, though lacked the irritation and exasperation usually reflected back at him from her cousin’s gaze.

With a jolt, it occurred to him she was rather lovely.

“Izzy’s parents are in London and I decided to come along. Is Izzy here with you tonight?”

In her earnest tone, he heard the concern for her cousin.

Swiveling his head around the crowded hall he spotted Izzy, standing with Charles’s mistress, exactly where she said she would be, surprisingly. He pointed in her direction.

“Thank you, my lord.” With a short nod, she headed in the direction he’d pointed.

When Ram turned back to his friend, he caught Lucien’s gaze following Belinda as she walked away, a contemplative look on his

face.

“Your wife’s friend? I thought beautiful women like your wife preferred to keep company with less attractive friends.” Lucien shook his head even as he continued to watch Belinda disappear into the crowd.

Ram raised an eyebrow in surprise at Lucien’s obvious attraction to Belinda, but then his protective instincts arose. Belinda had been kind to him, and she’d given him her support when he needed it, although the last time he encountered her she was quite cool to him, which led him to believe Izzy had shared the details of their wedding night. Even if she was angry with him, she’d earned his respect and he would watch over Belinda as he’d always watched over his sister and now his wife. And while he loved his friend dearly, Lucien’s reputation as a libertine meant he could be a danger to an inexperienced woman like Belinda.

“My wife’s cousin, Lucien. No one of particular interest.”

Lucien looked away from Belinda. “No, quite right. No fire in that one. She seemed quite the timid thing.”

Ram bit back a smile, remembering Belinda’s anger at him when Izzy had flown. But he wasn’t about to volunteer that information. He certainly didn’t want to inadvertently challenge Lucien to do something stupid.

Lucien moved on to a new subject. “Come. Let’s go visit our merry monarch, shall we? He’ll be delighted to see you.”

Ram nodded. He had an issue or two to speak with the King about anyway. After all, as the head of the church, an annulment fell

squarely in his lap.

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Izzy stood near Barbara Palmer's elbow, feigning an interest she didn't really feel as the Countess gossiped about the different courtiers as they passed by. The King's lover used her fan as a weapon, pointing it at people about whom she had a particularly spicy tale, or using it to cover her expression of distaste or humor as she told scintillating tales of others. After spending a half hour in the woman's company, Izzy didn't like her anymore than she had upon their first meeting, but it was probably best to remain on this woman's good side. She did share the bed of the King of England, after all.

"And look at this little country mouse coming our way. What's she doing out of the schoolroom do you think?" Barbara remarked in a snide tone as she handed down her indictment to whichever unfortunate woman caught her notice, tossing her sable hair back over her shoulder as she did so, a motion Izzy noticed she did often, likely to draw attention to the fabulous diamonds fastened about her neck. A gift, no doubt, from her royal lover.

Izzy turned in the direction Barbara motioned without much interest, which changed the instant she recognized the "little country mouse" as Belinda. With a gasp she flew from the Countesses' side, giving no word of excuse. She reached Belinda and wrapped her arms around her.

"Belinda! What in the world are you doing here! Wait, I don't care, I'm just so glad you're here! Come, let's go somewhere we can be private."

“Izzy! You look ravishing! Please, let me catch my breath first.”

Izzy left her for a moment to fetch two goblets of wine, and shoved one into her cousin’s hand upon her return. “Drink this.”

With a grateful look, Belinda took a heavy swallow. Izzy finished her own drink, somewhat peevishly as she remembered Ram’s warning. Then she let Belinda lead her outside onto a terrace that looked over the privy garden and afforded as much privacy as was possible at court.

Izzy glanced around quickly to see if Ram noticed her, for he’d be furious if he saw her go outside, assuming she had an assignation in mind no doubt, but he and his odious friend had disappeared from where they’d stood minutes before.

When they were finally beyond the crush of people, Izzy hugged Belinda again. “What are you doing here?”

“Your parents came to London, presumably to reopen the townhouse, but if you ask me it was to make sure Ram found you safe and to assure themselves all was well.” Belinda gave her a reproving look. “You shouldn’t have used me the way you did to run off.”

Izzy hung her head. “I know. I’m sorry, Bel. I needed the extra days to get here before Ram.”

“And? Is everything finally settled between you two now?”

Tears burned Izzy’s eyes and she shook her head. “It’s dreadful! Worse than dreadful.” She sniffed. “Did you say Mama and Papa are here?”

A yearning for her parents she hadn’t felt since she was a young girl rose within her. *Will Papa ever forgive me?*

“They are here tonight, but ‘tis not a good time to speak with them, in public like this, unless you want the entire court to know about your family strife. You don’t want to cause a scene to feed the gossipmongers. Why don’t you come to the townhouse tomorrow and see them, and then we can talk about what’s bothering you so.”

Izzy wanted that more than anything. She needed her cousin to help make sense of her situation. Belinda was so very good at that.

“I’ll come for supper, if you think Papa will be agreeable.”

“You’ll come by, even if he is not,” her cousin said in a tone that brooked no resistance, with a pat on Izzy’s hand. “Now, let’s go back inside before the gossips comment on your absence.”

Izzy’s relief almost crushed her. If anyone could help her sort out the mess she’d made, it was Belinda. Izzy led the way back inside, already with a lighter heart, plunging into the mad crush of people. Now that Belinda was at her side, Izzy meant to avoid Countess Castlemaine completely, but it seemed the woman had been waiting for her, for she motioned Izzy over as soon as they’d stepped back into the hall.

With a sigh, Izzy led Belinda toward the Countess. Barbara might be a snake, but it was always better to have the snake as a friend than an enemy.

“May I present to you my cousin, Miss Belinda Spencer?”

Barbara waved the introduction away, a smirk planted firmly on her face.

A gorgeous blonde woman had taken the place Izzy had so recently vacated, and Barbara looked from the woman to Izzy with an

air of unsuppressed enjoyment.

"Have you met my very good friend, Louisa Hanover?"

Izzy shook her head, giving the newest addition her full attention. The woman towered over Izzy and had flawless porcelain skin, with full lips pouty and rouged, but not overly so. She was exquisite. She'd gowned her statuesque figure in emerald silk, a shade that matched her eyes. A tasteful strand of emeralds twinkled against her neck.

"Louisa, please allow me to introduce you to my newest friend, Isabelle, Lady Royston."

The woman's spine stiffened as she turned to fully take Izzy's measure. Her green eyes flicked with mild interest from Izzy's hair right down to her toes and then back again, stopping for one moment to focus on the sapphires at her throat. Louisa's hand rose to her neck where she toyed with the beautiful emeralds, as if making a comparison. Instant dislike sparked in her unusual eyes.

*How on Earth had she offended this unknown woman?*

"I believe the two of you have an acquaintance in common?" Barbara's eyes glittered with unsuppressed glee. Izzy grew instantly wary. She'd spent enough years amongst courtiers of all types and recognized the look on Barbara's face. She was about to cause mischief, and she reveled in it. Someone was about to be caught unaware, and Izzy had an inkling it was she.

"Oh?" Izzy turned to Louisa, trying to affect an interested mien.

Instead, the woman turned to Barbara. "Darling, you know it's uncouth to introduce a man's mistress to his wife."

Izzy went cold all over. This beautiful woman was—or had been— Ram's mistress?

Jealousy skewered her, forced her chin to raise, her back to go ramrod straight. She would not let these women see how much the words rankled.

How like Barbara to deliberately fan the flames of malcontent for her own amusement.

But the Countess underestimated her adversary. Izzy would be damned before she ever let them get a rise out of her!

"No worries, *darling*." Izzy affected their lazy drawl. She hadn't spent the last decade living amongst courtiers and not learned how to play the court game. "A mistress is merely a woman a man deems too inconsequential to make his wife." She spoke to Barbara, but the barb was aimed squarely at Louisa. "It takes a smart woman to win the real prize." Izzy snapped her fan open, waving her wedding band in Louisa's face.

The woman drew herself up to her full height. "A man has need of a mistress when his wife is frigid in the bedchamber."

"I suppose you won't be seeing very much of my husband in the near future, then."

Fury flared in Louisa's eyes, respect in Barbara's.

"You didn't *win* anything, darling. Poor Ramsay was forced into marriage by his father. Ram went to Cornwall every week for nearly a month, seeking any valid reason to call the wedding off." Louisa smirked. "He told me all about it, each time he returned to London. La, I pity him. In the end he had to hold his nose and marry anyway."

Izzy swallowed a cry of anguish. Each time Ram left her at the crofter's hut, had he returned to London, to this woman's arms, to ease the lust he never spent on her? Could it be true he wanted to find a way out of the betrothal, too? Was that before they met, or after? Had he talked to Louisa about *her?*

Though she was suddenly sick inside, Izzy was determined to have the final say. Feeling as fragile as glass, she stood taller. "Anyone who thinks they know Ramsay Maitland but believes he could ever be forced to do anything against his will doesn't truly know him at all."

She forced her lips to curl into a smile. "In the end, despite our fathers' previous agreement, Ram begged me to marry him, practically on bended knee." Izzy clutched her fan to keep from trembling. They were beginning to make a scene and Izzy wanted nothing more than to escape these catty women and this place.

The blonde's next retort was cut off when Belinda, standing almost forgotten, laid a hand on Izzy's arm.

"Come, Izzy, we should seek your parents."

Bless Belinda. As simply as that, she diffused the situation.

Izzy rose up to her full, albeit much shorter than Louisa's, height. "If you'll excuse me, my lady," she spoke to the Countess, ignoring Louisa completely.

They left the presence of the women, but Izzy's emotions were roiling so violently inside she was scarce aware of where Belinda led her, until she found herself back on the terrace, gasping in the fresh air in large draughts, with only one thought in her mind. *Was that odious woman Ram's mistress, still?*

“Don’t let them get to you, Izzy. Those women were only being spiteful, you know that.”

Izzy wasn’t so sure. Louisa certainly knew private details of their betrothal, What else had Ram told his mistress?

“What if it’s true, Belinda? What if he wanted to find a way out of the marriage as much as I did?”

Belinda hesitated. Izzy’s eyes widened. “What is it?”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Izzy. He did want out of the betrothal, but only until he discovered the woman he met on May Day was his betrothed. After that he was determined to have you, no matter what. And if you’d not made that confession to your father while Ram was in the study, I’ve no doubt he *would* have begged your forgiveness and your hand, on bended knee, just as you told that horrid woman.”

Izzy grabbed Belinda’s hand. “You are truly the best friend I could ever have.” Belinda smiled and squeezed back. Izzy took a deep breath. No matter what it took, she would put Barbara, Louisa, and all the rest of her woes out of mind until later, when she could be alone with her thoughts. Under no circumstances would she become overwrought at court, before everyone, and become the subject of speculation and gossip. “It’s so wonderful to see you. I’ve been so lost, so alone without you. I have no friends here. I’m so grateful you’re here, Bel.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

Izzy burst into tears.

# Chapter 23

Belinda stared at Izzy with dismay. When was the last time she'd seen her cousin so miserable, so out of her element? Obviously, things were not going well at all.

Guilt niggled in her mind for pushing Izzy in this direction. The Baron might have thought Ramsay Maitland was the right man for his daughter, but now it appeared he'd been very, very wrong.

She took Izzy's hand, placing the remainder of her own goblet of wine into it, urging Izzy to drink it, hoping to settle some of her cousin's unease.

"Everything will be all right, Izzy, don't fret. Those women were being spiteful for the sake of being mean."

Izzy shook her head. "It's not only them. It's everything. It's Ram, and Paul too. Did I tell you he's here, at court?"

Belinda's heart sank to the pit of her stomach. No wonder Izzy was so upset and unbalanced!

"You've not done anything inappropriate, have you?"

Izzy sniffled, before taking a sip of her drink. "Of course not." She huffed.

"But you want to?" Belinda finished the unspoken sentiment.

Izzy's tears began again. "Oh, Bel, I'm not sure. I thought I did, but it doesn't feel right when I'm with Paul now. I'm not the woman he left three years ago, and I don't know if he could overlook that. And even if I were, Ram won't consider an annulment. I don't know

what to do."

"You're still trying to have Ram annul your marriage? Are you mad? You've been cohabitating in *London*. Think of the scandal! It would be immense if you annulled your marriage now!"

Izzy's face flushed. "You're always so worried about scandal, when that's not what's most important! I'm not mad, Bel. I *love* Paul. If Ram truly cared he'd not keep me trapped in this marriage."

How blunt did she need to be in order to open Izzy's eyes? Obviously, her cousin needed some sense shocked into her. "Is it any wonder then that Ramsay would keep a mistress, if his wife constantly avows her love for another man?"

"That's cruel! I've deprived Ram of nothing."

Belinda's cheeks heated. "So you've given him access to the marital bed, whilst proclaiming love for another?" Consternation filled her. "Izzy, what have you done?"

Izzy's face crumpled into tears anew. Her head shook, but she couldn't speak. Belinda moved to take her into her arms, noticing how unsteady on her feet Izzy was.

"What's amiss here?" Ram's deep voice, laced with concern, invaded the silence as he stepped onto the terrace.

Before Belinda could answer, Izzy pushed herself away to face her husband. She hiccupped. "Everything is fine."

He peered closely into her face. "Has she had too much to drink?" His question was aimed at Belinda, though his eyes never left Izzy's face. Belinda read the concern reflected in his gaze and in that moment recognized a truth beyond any doubt. *Ram loves her.*

Her spirits lifted. Mayhap everything wasn't as dreadful as it first appeared. "It's been a busy night, my lord."

He frowned. "Why is she crying?"

Belinda no longer doubted Ram would take good care of Izzy. Sidestepping his question, she said, "she needs to be put to bed. Shall I take her home for you?"

He shook his head as he stepped to his wife's side, wrapping a tender arm around her waist. "I'll see her home." Finally, he spared a look in her direction. "Thank you, Belinda."

She nodded, watching as he led an unsteady Izzy off the balcony. Then she turned to face out into the garden, immersed in contemplation.

She'd never seen Izzy so unruffled before. So out of her element. Could she be experiencing feelings for Ramsay that had bloomed during their brief and unusual courtship before their marriage? That could be confusing enough to throw anyone off balance, especially if one thought they were in love with another man. It was most telling that Izzy hadn't mentioned Paul's presence until *after* the unpleasant encounter with that Louisa woman.

The more she thought about it, the more positive she became her suspicions were dead on. Hadn't Izzy burst into tears mere moments after learning of Ram's mistress? Belinda frowned. She would have a talk with Ram about that woman.

Hands landed on her hips from behind and she gasped, spinning around to see who dared touch her so familiarly. Dismay settled heavy in her belly as she found herself face to face with Paul

Huntley.

"Belinda Spencer," he purred, taking her fingers and bringing them to her lips. "You look lovelier than ever."

She snatched her hand back. "What do you want?" she snapped.

"Come now, is that the way to greet an old friend you haven't seen in years?" He stepped closer, crowding her.

"You are *not* my friend."

"I could be." he murmured. "The offer I made you the last time we saw one another still stands."

"You reprehensible lout. My cousin fancies herself in love with you. Even if I didn't find you repulsive, do you think I'd ever betray her like that?"

His eyes blazed at the insult. "Izzy need never know. Certainly, in the years that have passed you've come to know the touch of a man. I'd treat you well. You know you'll never receive a better offer, and the chances you'll ever snare a husband are slim. You're no great beauty and you lack a dowry."

She gasped at the insult. "Not if you were the last man left breathing on the planet."

"Give me a chance to change your mind." His hands descended again to settle on her waist, "come to my bed for one night and I guarantee you'll beg for more come morning." He yanked her so hard toward him, Belinda lost her footing. Before she could regain it and slip out of his grasp, he smashed his lips against hers.

*What did Izzy see in this man?*

He applied pressure to her lower jaw, trying to force her mouth open under his. Belinda shoved against him, panic settling in when she found herself struggling just to gain a breath.

And then, miraculously, he let her go abruptly.

“I believe the lady said she wasn’t interested, Huntley.”

Breathing heavily to draw much needed air back into her lungs, Belinda stepped back, wiping the back of her hand against her mouth, as if she could wipe away the unpleasant encounter. When she recovered her composure she looked up and found her champion was the man Ramsay had been conversing with earlier, when she interrupted him. Casting a grateful glance his way, she took another step away from Paul, closer to the man who’d intervened on her behalf. Any friend of Ramsay’s was trustworthy enough for her.

“I don’t think this is any business of yours, de Vere.”

“Is it not?” his lazy voice belied the stiffening of his body. Paul seemed not to notice, but Belinda could see the carefully controlled rage beneath the surface of the newcomer’s visage.

“Why don’t you go back inside and let me finish my business with the lady?” Paul drawled.

Her savior moved so quickly, Belinda yelped and jumped out of his way. Paul was taken unaware and in a trice found himself facing the wall, his right arm twisted behind his back.

“Perhaps you’d care to rethink that?”

Paul struggled for a moment, then went limp. “I don’t have any serious interest in the little bitch anyway, she’s a cold fish. You can have her.” Paul snapped.

De Vere dropped Paul's arm and stepped back, shrugging his black doublet back into position over his impossibly wide shoulders.

For a moment, Paul's eyes met hers, and she sucked in a hard breath, for his gaze promised retribution. But after another quick glance at her rescuer, Paul straightened his clothing and scampered back inside.

She breathed deeply, trying to recover her composure. After years spent in the various courts of Europe, she should be used to advances like that, but still, she was shaken. Paul had propositioned her before, but this was the first time he'd ever accosted her.

"Did he hurt you?" Her savior asked, his voice soft as he slowly approached. "Are you well?"

She nodded and met his stare. "I am well, thanks to you." She studied his handsome face. The muscles in his jaw were still rigid, but his eyes were warm as they examined her. "You're a friend of Lord Royston?"

He nodded, then bowed. "Lord Lucien De Vere. And you are Lady Royston's cousin, Miss Spencer?" He stepped closer, tucking back a strand of hair that had come loose in her scuffle with Paul.

Discomfited by the familiar touch, she nodded.

"Don't you know it's dangerous to come outside like this alone? You're inviting all manner of trouble. Not all men are gentlemen."

Was he suggesting she had brought Paul's unwanted advances upon herself? Normally a comment like that would send her temper soaring…except coming from him it threw her off kilter instead. The man's nearness affected her terribly, making her confused and tongue-

tied. The only time she'd ever felt like this before was when she'd found herself alone with Heath in the past. Thoughts jumbling together, she struggled to form a coherent sentence.

"Lord and Lady Royston were out here with me just moments ago. And I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. This is not my first visit to Court."

His brilliant green eyes darkened. "From what I could see, you weren't doing a very fine job of it."

"Paul caught me off guard, that's all." Why did her voice sound so breathless? "I would have gotten the situation under control had you not happened along."

"I see. So you truly think you've the experience to fend off a persistent rake, then?" He suddenly looked amused, and that both annoyed her and put her on alert.

"Paul is no rake, sir, but a predator. Either way, I think you overstep yourself. I am grateful for your assistance. 'Tis much appreciated, but I need no further aid this evening."

Merry green eyes twinkled back at her and the chiseled perfection of his face when he smiled made her breath hitch and her pique lessen. Which was wholly unfair.

"Grant me a small boon then, for the aid I did render."

Swallowing hard, she nodded, suddenly not quite trusting him, despite his friendship with Ramsay. She didn't trust herself, for that matter. "What would you ask?"

Within seconds she found herself pressed against the hard wall of the man's chest, much the way Paul had done mere moments

before. Except she wasn't revolted by this man's touch. Not at all. His hand swept around the curve of her waist, while the other lightly cupped her cheek, holding her firmly in place. His mouth pressed against hers, sweeping in a gentle motion from side to side, and then his tongue ran along the length of lips, nibbling lightly. She gasped in pure astonishment at his forwardness and he took advantage to slide his tongue further inside her mouth. For a few long moments she allowed herself the experience of the kiss, as their tongues slid wetly against each other. As if they'd developed a mind of their own her fingers curled in his doublet. She absorbed the unique feel and heat of the man kissing her so leisurely, felt the hard planes and angles of his muscular body pressing so intimately against hers, molding in perfect harmony against her own soft flesh.

And then the reality of the situation crept in to her fogged mind.

Shocked by her uninhibited behavior, she pushed against his massive chest to free herself from the now unwelcome embrace. But unlike Paul, Lord Lucien let her go instantly, stepping back to give her air.

His eyes sparkled with amusement, and it was the final straw. Her temper broke.

"Why is it men think they can force themselves on any woman they come across?"

She expected a retort, but he merely raised an eyebrow. That one facial movement spoke volumes. For they both knew he hadn't forced anything upon her. Which made the situation even worse. She

flushed.

Clarity dawned, and with it, a niggling pain in her chest. The whole point of the exercise had been to prove she couldn't resist a persistent rake, then. And he'd been proven correct. The sudden awareness that their kiss had been nothing but a lesson was followed by stinging humiliation. She turned away before he could see the heat rising in her cheeks. "You sir, are no gentleman."

As she stalked back inside, she heard his hearty chuckle. "I never claimed to be one, Miss Spencer."

Her step faltered, but she forced herself on. She must have had too much to drink as well. It was time to find Izzy's parents and beg them to take her home.

Later that night, lying in bed, the last thing Belinda saw in her mind's eye before she let sleep claim her were dancing green eyes in a handsome face. And for once, it wasn't Heath she dreamed of.

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Fury ate at Paul like a festering wound. He'd been thwarted not once, but twice that day. He was a man accustomed to getting what he wanted, and he'd been denied both women he fancied in his bed.

How dare Miss Spencer look down a haughty nose at him? Like she was some highborn woman who could afford to be picky about her lovers? He was a step up for her, how dare she offend him as she had done?

And Izzy? He'd been patient for years, waiting on her to be married off so he could finally have her in his bed. Oh, he'd always known she had aspirations of becoming his wife, but he'd never had

any intentions of making it so. Years of war had left Gerald Beaumont without a farthing to his name. When Paul wed, he would marry a woman who would replenish his own much needed money supply through her dowry.

And now that Izzy was married she thought to play the role of virtuous bride? With him? He'd nearly had her on her back with her skirts flipped over her head years ago. She'd been as hot for him as he'd been for her in those days. He'd only resisted because her father was a powerful man, and he didn't fancy being forced to the altar for deflowering the man's prized daughter.

But he thought they had reached an understanding, that once she married she would yield all to him. Obviously, marriage to Lord Royston had turned her uppity. She now thought him unworthy of her favors.

Well, he would teach her who held the real power in this game.

The little idiot didn't even realize she'd given him all the information he needed to affect a cunning plan.

Thoughts of vengeance excited him, aroused him like a randy lad about to mount his first woman. He would take his revenge, and it would be sweet. But tonight he needed a different kind of outlet for his frustrations.

From across the crowed room he made eye contact with Royston's cast-off, the beauteous Louisa Hanover. With a sharp jerk of his head toward the door, she began to move, meeting him just outside the great hall.

They'd barely made it back to his chambers before he had her

pinned against the wall, tearing at her clothing. She lacked the innocence that so attracted him to Izzy and her prissy little cousin, but she would do for this night.

"Darling, slow down. You don't want this to end before it begins, do you?" She asked in her throaty voice.

Nay. He didn't. He'd had Louisa before, and her appetite for the deviant was as strong as his. How a man like Royston had ever thought to satisfy her mystified him.

Still, she was useful, and he'd all but ordered her to slip the news to Izzy of her position as Royston's mistress. Let Izzy know infidelity was the norm, not the exception, in case she carried any misconceptions.

Tonight, he'd have Royston's ex-mistress. And very soon he'd have the man's wife in his bed. Perhaps one night he'd take them both, at the same time. The thought excited him to new heights.

Within moments, he had Louisa splayed upon his bed, her wrists tied to the headboard with lengths of soft leather. With a slow and taunting motion he pulled out the switch he kept at hand for such occasions. She turned her head to face him, and for a moment, her eyes widened, and fear shone back at him. But she licked at her lips and excitement soon replaced the fear.

When he brought the switch down across her perfect backside, she moaned, the sound half filled with pleasure, half with pain. The sound heightened his passion and he brought the switch down, harder and harder, until thin lines of blood began to appear across her creamy flesh.

Frenzied now, she pulled against the ties that bound her, and Paul could hold back no more. He gripped the back of her thighs and yanked her legs apart further, burying himself inside her as hard as he could.

The blood the switch left behind rubbed off onto his stomach, and it excited him to new levels. She rose onto her knees to meet him thrust for thrust. He pounded into her, all the while imagining Izzy's chestnut hair, how he would control her with that glorious mane when he finally got her into his bed.

Louisa moaned, bucking against him, and he felt the exquisite sensations of her inner muscles clamping around his throbbing shaft. With one final thrust, he reached the precipice, throwing back his head when the white-hot pleasure lanced through him, and he spilled himself inside her welcoming heat.

Vengeance would be even sweeter.

# Chapter 24

If the ride to White Hall had been tense, the ride home could only be described as morose. Once again, Izzy refused to meet Ram's gaze, but it wasn't out of anger she avoided looking at him. Something had gone terribly awry at court.

Could it be she was upset because she'd not been able to see the King as she'd hoped? Ram himself had taken up a good portion of Charles' time, warning him Izzy might approach him at any time and that she would use every weapon in her very considerable feminine arsenal into charming her monarch into helping her.

Not surprisingly, this had amused Charles, but when Ram told him that he would be the one to seek the annulment, the King's humor had faded fast.

"Ramsay, you have served me well, but I am beholden to the Beaumont family for all they did for my cause during the interregnum."

"She'll not protest the annulment, Your Majesty," Ram had assured him.

Charles, in his straightforward and blunt manner had demanded to know why both parties were so dissatisfied with the marriage. Put on the spot, Ram had been forced to explain that Izzy loved another man. Embarrassing enough to admit to one's king, but Lucien had stood beside him when he'd made the declaration, the slight raising of an eyebrow his only reaction.

Charles had simply shrugged. “It’s a good, fine match, the Maitlands and the Beaumonts. Find yourself a mistress, and look the other way. She’ll tire of her lover eventually. Lord Palmer certainly looks the other way whilst I dally with his wife.” He’d grinned widely. “If old Roger would only accept her back into his bed, he’d learn there were benefits to a man’s wife receiving lessons from a King in the art of love play.”

Ram couldn’t bring himself to laugh at the joke and had managed to contain his anger as he struggled for the correct words. “Sire, I’ll not risk my family’s legacy on a bastard.” He’d left the rest of what he’d wanted to say unspoken. Roger Palmer might look the other way while his wife bore the fruit of her affairs, but those children were bastards of the King of England, and would receive only the best in life. Charles was notoriously generous with his bastards and quick to recognize them. And Charles was not yet wedded. He might think differently if it was his own wife cuckolding him before the world. Ramsay and the king might be of like age, but they were a world apart in their view of women and marriage.

A servant had come over then, bending to whisper something into the monarch’s ear.

Charles had frowned, his entire demeanor changed. He’d stood, about to rush off some place. “I’ll consider your request, Ramsay. We’ll talk again soon.” And then the King had fled the hall as if the hounds of hell were at his feet.

Ram had to accept his monarch’s decision, for one did not pressure a man who could clap one in the Tower on a whim. Not that

he thought Charles ever would, but kings could be unpredictable at the best of times. Ram and Charles had shared a close camaraderie once, during the king's years of exile, but a man changed when a crown was placed upon his head.

Now Ram watched Izzy as she stared morosely out of the carriage window, wondering what had gone so wrong. Surely she was pleased to see Belinda, so what had upset her so?

Had they had words again? It hadn't looked like it when he saw them together.

He stiffened at the obvious answer. *Huntley*. It was only that peacock that held the power to upset her like this.

Still, he found he was not unaffected by her misery.

"Izzy?"

She turned to him, and he could see the effect of the liquor she'd drunk on her flushed face, in the glaze of her eyes. She'd probably done it with the sole intention of thwarting his orders. But he couldn't even summon anger at her obvious defiance, when faced with the telling stain of tears upon her cheeks.

"What's amiss?"

"It's nothing, my lord." Her voice was almost a whisper.

He wracked his brain, trying to think of something that would stir her into an angry frenzy, anything that might remove the sadness from her eyes, but nothing came to him.

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

He had to aid her up the stairs, so unsteady was she upon her feet.

An hour after he'd left her in her chamber to ready for bed, he went to the door that divided them, only to find her still sitting on the bed in her evening gown.

"Would you like aid removing your clothing, wife?"

Finally, she sparked with …something. But it wasn't the annoyance he expected. She stood and walked an unsteady path toward him. He didn't say a word as she placed her hand on his chest, studying it as it lay against the silk of his dressing gown.

She frowned. "Do you find me cold and unresponsive, Ramsay?"

What new madness was this?

"You're one of the warmest, most passionate women I've ever met."

Her frown deepened.

"Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity."

He was caught off guard when she leaned up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck. She tugged his head down to hers and for a moment he drowned in the sweet taste of her mixed with the wine she'd drank.

Warning bells went off in his head. He couldn't let himself be seduced. He'd made a firm decision, and unless her feelings for Paul had changed, he would not take her to his bed. No matter how tempting the offer.

He reached behind his neck, grasping her hands and gently unclasped them from around his neck. "Not tonight. You are flown

with wine."

"Not that flown," she pouted.

"Nay, Izzy."

"I need you, Ram," she choked out. His heart lurched.

"Why, Izzy?" He inhaled a breath, waiting, hoping, her answer would be the one he wanted to hear. "Why do you need me?"

"I-I need to know that I, t-that you…I want to"- She blew out a frustrated breath. "I don't know what I want anymore." She clamped her mouth shut.

Hope withered in his chest. She didn't want him, she wanted him to be a substitute. Again.

"Nay, Isabelle."

She gazed at him with blue eyes filled with confusion and hurt. "Why? Because you prefer Louisa, who isn't cold and unresponsive? Is that it?"

For a moment he froze, then swore profusely under his breath. Who the hell told her about Louisa? He searched his memory, trying to remember if his ex-mistress was present this evening, but if so, he hadn't seen her. Still, White Hall was a gossip mill, anyone could have told his wife about his ex-mistress. In fact, the more malicious gossipmongers like Lady Palmer would take great pleasure in it.

Did it really bother Izzy so very much? A tiny bit of hope unfurled in his heart again. Was she jealous? If she was, did that mean she cared about him, even a little bit?

"Darling, I haven't seen Louisa that way since before I met you." He softened his tone.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. "'Tis true then? She's your mistress?"

"Was, Izzy. She *was* my mistress. She is no longer."

"You told her about me. About being forced to marry me. You came to Cornwall to find a reason not to marry me." Hurt flared in her eyes.

"Who told you all this, sweetheart?"

"Louisa." Izzy sniffled. "She's very beautiful," she whispered.

*She's a heartless bitch.* Their affair ended amicably enough. Why did women like Louisa and Barbara love to stir up trouble everywhere they went? Why the need to hurt innocent people who never wronged them?

He sighed and wrapped his arms around Izzy, holding her close. Sometimes it was easy to forget how young she was.

She rubbed her cheek against his chest. He reevaluated his earlier thought. She didn't need a substitute for Paul. She needed to be wanted. The urge to protect her from the Louisas and Barbaras of the world rose up in him, unwillingly. He'd seen Izzy excited, upset, angered, scared, inflamed- and everything in between. But he never would have guessed she could ever feel insecure, at least not because of another woman. Didn't she know that compared to practiced courtesans like Louisa and Barbara, she was luxurious silk, and they nothing but rough-edged homespun? "Louisa is part of my past and has nothing to do with you and me."

"Then why does she know about us? Why does she know you didn't want to marry me?"

Ram refrained from reminding Izzy that she'd done everything in her power to avoid marrying him. "I told her those things well before I ever met you. I would never speak of our private matters to anyone else."

"Did you go to her, each time you left me? She said- she knew you came to Cornwall each week and then returned to London."

He pulled back and lifted her chin to look into her eyes. "Nay, Izzy. I saw her but once, after I met you, and then only to make a clean break from her. If she hinted there was anything more than that, it was only to hurt you and raise doubts in your mind." He stroked her cheek. "If you let her words upset you, then you give her exactly what she wants."

She dropped her gaze to the floor. "I told her that you- that you begged me to marry you on bended knee."

Ram choked on a laugh. He'd have a hell of a time living that one down, once it that little tidbit got around. God, he adored her audacity!

He hugged her tightly. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, sweetheart."

She raised her head. The corners of her mouth lifted in a tiny hint of a smile. She gazed up at him, and the smile slowly faded. Her arms crept around his neck; she raked the fingernails of one hand softly against his nape. His breath caught.

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Nay, Izzy."

She tensed. "But *why*? If you don't find me cold, and there's nothing between you and Louisa, then why won't you make love to

me?" she whispered, dejected.

He clenched his eyes shut for a brief moment, praying for strength. If only their marriage wasn't on such shaky ground. If only he could tell her how he felt about her. If only he knew there was a chance she could love him, even a little.

But she'd had too much to drink. How to explain in a way that would permeate her inebriated state and make sense to her? And even if she were jealous of the idea of him keeping a mistress, that didn't mean her feelings towards Huntley had changed.

"It's just not right. Not with the way things stand between us now. Every time we make love, one of use gets hurt."

She stiffened. Her entire demeanor changed. "Fine. In the cottage you taught me how to pleasure myself, I can see to my own needs."

He grinned. Only his Izzy would be so blatantly bold. She could tempt a eunuch.

"And I'll fantasize about Paul the entire time."

Her words wiped the smile from his face.

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*Why did she say that?* Izzy thought, dismayed as she watched Ram's eyes go from a soft, laughing gray to cold as steel in a single heartbeat. Well, she couldn't back down now. He'd hurt her by his rejection, it was only fair he receive a taste of what he dished out.

Turning on her heel, she stalked a tad unsteadily towards her bed, pulling pins from her hair as she went. Within moments, she'd divested herself of her clothing, and prepared to get into the bed,

nude. A quick glance toward the dividing door revealed Ram still standing there, fury evident in the stiffness of his stance, and by the throbbing muscle in his jaw.

She would simply ignore him.

Throwing the coverlet back on the bed, she laid down, about to cover herself, than changed her mind. If Ram wanted to stand there and watch, then let him watch.

Breathing in deep, calming breaths, she tried to clear her mind of anger and ignore the little voice that told her she was being absurd. She allowed the liquor to rule her mind instead, letting it squash the little voice.

Bringing her hands up to her breasts, she touched herself. It didn't feel the same as it did when Ram touched her, but still it was pleasant. Cupping her breasts, she pinched her own nipples, surprised to feel an answering response between her legs.

*Paul. I must think of Paul.* She imagined him then, with his golden hair, lowering his lips to suckle her nipples. Her fingers tightened on the puckered peaks. She tugged and rolled them between her fingers, loving the sensation. But the fantasy image changed, and it was dark hair she looked upon as she imagined a man suckling her breasts.

Ramsay.

This wouldn't do! She'd told him she would think of Paul, and she would.

Her left hand remained on her breast, stroking, as her right hand ventured down over her stomach, to rest in the vee between her

legs. Before she even touched herself, she could feel the heat emanating from her center. Heat coming from the place that ached to be touched.

She obliged, running one finger down her own cleft, as she'd done with Ram guiding her, that wonderful day so long ago.

Her touch was light at first, like the soft flutter of a butterfly's wings, but soon she applied more pressure, stroked with more urgency. Her flesh swelled and moistened beneath her fingers.

A moan escaped her lips.

*Paul*, her mind whispered. She forced herself to say his name aloud.

Again she conjured his visage, imagining him looming above her, poised to enter her body. His blue eyes stared directly into hers, his blond hair as soft as silk as it brushed against her breasts.

Her fingers continued to dance across her flesh, and then she slid one finger into her own heat. The image of Paul wavered, and suddenly it was Ram making love to her in her mind. It was Ram, towering over her; his body, all planes and hard angles; his hair, black as sin; his steely eyes that looked right into her soul.

Nay! She would *not* think of that silver-eyed devil! She banished his image again, trying to summon Paul, but the fantasy faded away, only to be replaced once again by her husband.

Inadequate. One finger was inadequate. Her hips wriggled beneath her touch, but she yearned for release. She slid a second finger inside to join the first, moving them in and out. She used her thumb to stroke her sensitive bud, the way Ram did when he made

love to her. Finally, that wonderful tension began to coil deep within her belly

Her motions rocked the bed as she used her fingers on herself. Her left hand kept time with the right, squeezing her nipple each time her fingers plunged inside. Through the haze of her arousal and the liquor, she heard her own moans, growing louder and louder as she moved closer to gaining release. Finally, she allowed her imagination to run free, and an image of Ram rose up clear in her mind. She pretended it was he who filled her, he who stroked her. Gasping and moaning, her hips bucked against her hand. Her breath caught and she cried out as her body exploded in pleasure, as she felt the release of hot moisture over her fingers.

She kept stroking herself lightly as she recovered from her climax.

"Ram."

She covered her mouth with her hand, horrified by the slip. She'd only whispered his name, but it would destroy the illusion of indifference she'd created if he'd heard. Anxious, she glanced at the door between their chambers.

She needn't have worried.

Ram was gone.

# Chapter 25

A pounding in her head made itself known first thing as Izzy awakened the next morning. This was quickly followed by extreme mortification at her actions of the night before. Burying her face in her pillow, she groaned in dismay.

Had she really told *her husband* she would pleasure herself and think of another man while she did it?

Even she knew she'd gone too far this time. And while liquor might have lent the bravado needed to do what she'd done, deep down inside she knew it was pure stubbornness, plain and simple, a way to punish Ram for his rejection. With a sigh of regret, she hauled herself from the bed, prepared once again to track her husband down and try to make amends. Calling for Meg, she walked on unsteady feet to the wardrobe to ready herself to face the humiliation that surely lay before her.

But when she was finally dressed and ventured downstairs, Ram was nowhere in sight. Spotting Dexter in the foyer, she gained his attention.

"Good morn, Dexter. Do you perchance know where I might find my husband?"

His answering smile seemed strained. "He's in the study, my lady," she turned on her heel to go to him, but the butler's next words stopped her. "He specifically left instructions he was not to be disturbed."

She was about to protest that certainly that didn't preclude his wife from speaking with him, when Dexter added, "especially by you."

She froze, absorbing the full impact of his words. Some of what she felt must have shown on her face, for Dexter hurried to say, "I'm very sorry, my lady."

Her behavior last night had been inexcusable; Ram had every right to be cross with her today. Inhaling a deep breath, she tried not to take it personally. His anger would fade and then she'd apologize.

"It's all right Dexter. Will you have the carriage brought round?"

He seemed relieved to be able to do something for her. "Certainly."

When the butler was out of sight, she allowed her shoulders to sag. She deserved Ram's anger. She'd just not expected his lack of desire to clap eyes upon her to sting so much.

She would visit Belinda as planned, and surely, by the time she returned he would be ready to hear her apology.

She prayed it would be so.

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Belinda was waiting for her when Izzy arrived at her parent's house. Disappointed to find her mother and father gone for the afternoon, and not completely certain her father wasn't avoiding her, Izzy settled into the drawing room with her cousin for their chat.

The place had an old, musty feel to it, as though it had been uninhabited for a long while, and she didn't have any sense of belonging here. It had been too long since she'd been to this house to

consider it home. Still, it was comfortably decorated. She could see her mother's touch in all of the fine details, from the blue and gold damask on the walls, to the upholstered blue velvet mahogany chairs with fanciful scalloped edges that beckoned to be sat upon.

She seated herself on one before turning to her cousin.

"I've mucked up everything, Bel."

"Certainly it cannot be so bad."

"It is beyond bad."

Steeling herself for Belinda's disapproval, she filled her cousin in on all that had happened since she'd come to London. When she finished the sorry tale, the look on Belinda's face could only be described as horror.

"Oh, Izzy," Belinda whispered.

Izzy hated that particular combination of words more than any other. "I told you I mucked things up. But why couldn't Ram have just agreed to grant me the annulment?"

Belinda sighed. "Firstly, the circumstances are the same as they were before your marriage. Your families need this match. Don't you realize if an annulment were granted, your father would lose everything he gained from the Earl? He's only able to come to London and reopen this house because of that money. As it is, he brought Thomas with us from Cornwall to serve as a butler as he can't yet afford to hire a new one."

Izzy's selfishness horrified her. The thought had never even crossed her mind. What would her father do if she managed to convince Ram to grant her the annulment?

There was no time for true speculation on the matter, for Belinda was still speaking.

“Secondly, has it ever even occurred to you that Ram might have strong feelings for you?”

Izzy scoffed. “Feelings? He treated me most discourteously on our wedding night.”

“But since then, has he hurt you in any way?”

Izzy had to admit he had not.

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Izzy. He cares a great deal for you.”

She frowned as Belinda’s words churned through her mind. Could it be true? Was that why he was so upset with her all the time?

“But Ram can’t love me. I love Paul.” She whispered.

Belinda took her hand. “Do you, Izzy? Do you truly?”

She opened her mouth to respond, but Belinda continued without letting her speak. “Are you sure you’re not clinging to your old feelings because you’ve thought you wanted him for so long, you think you still have to want him? Because people will believe you fickle if you suddenly stop wanting him?”

Izzy was about to scoff again, but Belinda went on. “If I met someone and was attracted to him, I’m positive you wouldn’t think me fickle if I stopped mooning over Heath.”

Belinda’s cheeks had turned pink and Izzy frowned. “But that would be a wonderful thing. And it’s different! You can’t ever have Heath, not the way you want him.”

“But you can’t ever have Paul, Izzy! You’re married to another

man!"

"That doesn't mean my feelings for Paul changed overnight, Bel."

"Are you sure your feelings didn't change a long time ago? I know you're still fond of Paul, but fondness isn't love. You're not the same woman you were three years ago when you and Paul parted. When you first saw him again and he kissed you, how did it feel?"

"It felt all wrong. But that's because I'm a married woman."

"I don't believe that's the reason. Answer honestly. How did it feel when Ram kissed you, when you thought he was Julian and you thought yourself in love with Paul?"

The truth was like a blow to the solar plexus. "It felt right," Izzy whispered. And it had. Despite her betrothal to another man, despite her avowals of love for Paul, when Ram, as Julian, held her in his arms and kissed her and touched her, everything had felt so very right about it. She'd missed him terribly during those long days when he was gone, and not because she'd wanted to lose her virginity so very quickly.

Belinda pressed on. "Last night, when you found out about Ram's mistress, how did you feel?"

Even now, the thought of Ram keeping a mistress hurt unbearably. She shook her head, unable to answer the simple question.

"And if I told you Paul had a mistress, too?"

Even when Ram had pointed out Paul has most likely not remained faithful to her, the thought of Paul with another woman had

wounded her pride, but she hadn't experienced any of the terrible hurt that Louisa caused last night, with her malicious hints that there was still something between her and Ram.

Suddenly it was like the turning of a key in a lock. Everything tumbled into place and there existed perfect clarity where until that moment had been only murky confusion. *I love Ram*. There could be no other reason for the pain and jealousy she'd experienced at Louisa's words, or for her aching need to be with her husband, for her devastation each time she hurt him, or found herself the object of her anger. She clapped a hand to her mouth.

"What is it?" Belinda's asked sharply.

"I- I think I'm in love with Ram," Izzy whispered.

Her cousin's face lit with a big smile. "What an untenable position to find yourself then, married to the man you're in love with."

Izzy stared at Belinda as realization dawned that she had already known. But how had Bel known before even she?

Belinda must have sensed her unspoken question. "It's in your eyes when you look at him too, Izzy. It's been there since the day I caught you by the riverbank and you told me all about *Julian*." She smiled. "'Tis the only reason I kept his identity from you," Belinda added softly.

Izzy didn't know whether to laugh or cry over the revelation.

She loved her husband.

"Oh Bel, I must go to him, tell him…"

Belinda stood quickly. "Of course you must! I wouldn't hear of

anything else."

Izzy almost tore to the door in her haste to see Ram, but before she made it out of the drawing room, she turned back, throwing her arms around Belinda.

"I don't know what I would ever do without you."

"You'll never have to find out. Now go on home to your husband, you silly goose."

Izzy smiled her first true smile in days as she bid her cousin farewell.

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Ram stared morosely into a tumbler of liquor. It was cowardly to barricade himself in his study, but he just couldn't bear to face Izzy. Not after last night.

He'd stood in the doorway for a few minutes and watched her give pleasure to herself, knowing all the while she thought of another man. And this time it wasn't only speculation on his part, he knew for sure, because she'd told him. And she'd cried out Paul's name. He'd never experienced such pain or such blinding rage. He'd been so wrong. Her jealousy toward Louisa had meant nothing, for if she cared about him even a little, she could never be so cruel.

As erotic a tableau she'd made sprawled wantonly on her bed, he'd turned away, forced himself not to watch, because he'd been afraid he might physically harm her. Nevertheless, her sweet moans had carried into his bedchamber, haunting him all night long.

He couldn't bear to face her just yet. In time, he would tell her of his decision to grant the annulment she so desperately wanted, but

not today. Today he would mourn the loss of the woman he loved, and simmer in his resentment, too. Her selfishness astounded him. She thought of no one but herself. Certainly, she spared no thought for her family, and all they'd lose with the annulment and the scandal they would face, and certainly she spared no thought for him beyond the pleasure he brought her in bed. He married her even believing the worst of her, saving her from being disowned, and when he'd so foully wronged her, he'd done everything in his power to make amends for his behavior. He would have given her the world and spent his life ensuring her happiness, and despite all that, not only did she not respect him, or care if she caused him hurt, she didn't return even the smallest measure of his love.

He'd allow himself this short period of self-pity and mourning, and then his anger would fuel the steps he needed to take.

A knock at the door disturbed his revelry. He frowned, recognizing the distinct sound of his butler's knock. "I said I don't wish to be disturbed, Dex."

"You've a caller, my lord," Dexter spoke as he opened the door a crack and peered around it. "It is not your lady wife."

"Then who is it?"

"Lord Lucien De Vere, my lord."

Ram released a pent up breath. "Show him in."

He dragged his fingers through his hair and straightened his doublet. He downed the last of the liquor just as Lucien appeared in the doorway. If Lucien thought anything of Ram drinking so early in the day, he made no comment.

“This is a pleasant surprise.” He said as he grasped Lucien’s hand, and he really meant it. “What brings you here?”

His friend frowned. “I wanted to make sure all was well. Things seemed amiss last night. Especially after we spoke with the King.”

Ram looked away, knowing Lucien referred to his admission that Izzy loved another man.

“Would it help to speak of it?”

He contemplated his friend for a long moment. London society looked at Lucien as something of a rake, and a libertine. He went out of his way to foster that image, in fact. Rarely was he seen with the same woman more than once, and every mother of a daughter of marriageable age feared he would turn his irresistible attentions upon that daughter, when all knew it would never be marriage he had in mind. But beneath his exterior, Ram knew him to be a good and honorable man, who would never take advantage of an innocent. Since their early school days together, he’d known Lucien’s deepest secret. He had a soft heart and was a friend who always stuck by those he cared about.

Ram shrugged. “What’s a man to do when he finds his wife loves someone else?”

Lucien studied him closely. “If he loves her, as I fear he does, then perhaps he fights for her?”

“To what end, Lucien? No matter what direction we turn, we run up against the same wall, over and over again. Paul Huntley.

Lucien started. “Huntley?”

Ram grunted. “Aye, that bloody peacock.” He noticed his

friend's contemplative look, and recognized the expression on his face. "What do you know?" Ram demanded, his tone coming out sharper than he intended.

"Only that I rescued Miss Spencer from being pawed by Huntley in the garden after you'd gone last night."

"*What?"*

"Your wife's friend doesn't understand that when a lady says no, that's not an invitation to maul her until she changes her mind." Ram was surprised to see a flash of very real anger on Lucien's face, and the tightening of his jaw. "You'll be happy to know I gave him a taste of his own medicine."

It was so sad it was almost laughable. "My wife loves a man who loves no one but himself, and nothing anyone says will make her see reason."

"Perhaps if I recount to her what happened last evening?"

"I appreciate your willingness to help, Lucien. But I don't want Izzy to stay with me because she has no other option. If she wants Huntley, I'm not going to stand in her way."

"Even though you care very much for her?"

"*Because* I care so very much for her."

Lucien sighed. "This is why I don't allow any lady in my life for more than a few nights."

Ram grimaced. "You can rest assured I'll once again be living by those same rules. You've certainly never found yourself tangled in such a mess."

The butler knocked on the door again, and then coughed

discretely.

"Yes, Dexter?"

"You have another caller, my lord."

He frowned. Who else could possibly wish to see him? "Who is it?"

"A Sir Paul Huntley."

Ram's hand tightened around his empty tumbler. "Show him in, Dex."

Lucien sucked in a sharp breath.

"Aye, my lord."

Lucien exploded the moment Dexter left. "He *dares* to show his face here? And you are going to *entertain* the man? Ramsay, there is a fine line between nobility and foolishness."

"I'm curious to know what business he thinks he has here."

"Shall I go then?"

He looked to his friend. Ram was no coward, but he didn't relish facing the man his wife preferred, alone. "I'd appreciate your opinion on whatever he thinks he has to say to me."

Dexter led Huntley into the room. The man froze like a rabbit when he clapped eyes on Lucien, but recovered his composure enough to move before Ram's desk.

They were beyond politeness at this point. "State your business, Huntley."

The blonde man stiffened in affront. But then a smug look crawled over his face, and he seemed to relax. "I've a confidential matter to discuss with you, Maitland." His glance flickered toward

Lucien. “This might be better said in private.”

Ram deliberately didn’t offer any courtesies. “Lord Lucien will hear whatever it is you have to say.”

Huntley frowned. “As you wish.” He ambled to the paneled wall and leaned against, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve been ruminating upon a most enlightening *conversation* I recently had with your lady wife.”

Ram tensed. What had the little idiot done now?

“She told me about your involvement with the Royalist cause during the wars. Very intriguing, that. And noble, too. Any man would be proud to have such a brave son. Oh! But your father threw in his lot with Cromwell early on, didn’t he? How do you suppose your father would feel if he ever learned of such disloyalty taken against him by his only son?”

Fury sliced through Ram, bringing along a rage he’d never before felt in his life. It wasn’t enough his wife threatened to blackmail him with this information, but she engaged her would-be lover to aid her in her blackmail too? Did her perfidy know any bounds? He’d kill her with his own hands!

Leaping to his feet, Ram let out a snarl, prepared to charge Huntley. Only by Lucien putting himself bodily between him and his quarry was he stopped. Instead, Lucien turned to the man while Ram seethed at his back. “And I suppose you would use that information to secure an annulment for Lady Royston?”

Paul started, true surprise flashing across his face, but it cleared when he laughed. “Good God, nay. I would use the information to

gain funds."

Ram calmed a little bit. "You want me to pay you to keep your silence?"

"I do."

Ram glared at the man for a moment. "Get the hell out of here."

"Perhaps you'd care to rethink-"

"*Get out!"* Ram shouted.

Huntley fled. "I'll give you time to think on my offer," he called from the hall.

Silence reigned for a few moments, as Ram panted heavily, lamenting the lack of Huntley's throat between his hands. His mourning had ended sooner than he anticipated. Black rage and hatred consumed him.

"What will you do?" Lucien finally asked.

"They are welcome to each other." Ram snarled.

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The carriage couldn't take Izzy home nearly as fast as she desired, even if it suddenly sprouted wings and flew. She wanted nothing more than to be home, so she could throw herself into Ram's arms, declare her love for him, and then spend the afternoon and the evening, and the rest of her life making love to him. Making everything up to him.

How could she have been so foolish not to see what was before her all this time? Right from the beginning, when he was only Julian James to her, she'd been so drawn to him. He'd become an addiction.

Like the stories she'd heard of soldiers who couldn't get by without their laudanum, she'd gotten through her days with small doses of Ram, never realizing how she'd come to depend on him. How silly and childish she'd been to cling to the old dream of Paul.

It almost ruined her marriage.

But now, now, she would make sure everything was all right. They would put Paul behind them, and she would never speak his name again, for the sake of her beloved husband.

The carriage began to slow.

*Finally*!

She didn't wait for the driver to come round to help her down. She hopped out of the carriage and stumbled, but somehow managed to remain upright. She held back her laughter at the shocked expression on both the driver's and the footman's faces. Nothing could ruin her wonderful mood!

She tore open the front door, lacking the patience to even wait for Dexter to open the door as would have been decorous. All was still and silent in the house. She ran up the stairs, hoping to find Ram in his bedchamber.

When she stepped into her bedchamber, though, the hairs on her neck stood at attention. Moving towards the center of the room, she sought the cause. Something was very, very wrong.

She looked around slowly, in disbelief. All of her personal belongings were gone. The wardrobe stood empty. The book she'd left on the nightstand was absent. The dressing table held no bottle of perfume, no cosmetics.

Where were all of her possessions?

Fear curled in her gut.

Running through the door that adjoined her chamber to Ram's she froze, perplexed. All of his belongings were still neatly in their place.

Tearing back into the hallway, she called for Dexter as she ran down the stairs. And came up short as she nearly plowed into Ram's massive chest as she cleared the landing.

He reached for her, but not to steady her on her feet. Rather, he grabbed her around the upper arm and hauled her down the hall and into the study. Once inside he thrust her down, hard, into an empty chair.

A chill crawled over her when she read the raw fury in his eyes.

Surely, he couldn't still be upset about what she'd done last night?

"Ram?" she whispered. Her stomach began to cartwheel as she waited. Part of her wanted to shout out that she loved him, but the other part of her was too terrified to say a word. Too scared to know why her possessions were missing from her chamber. Too frightened to know why he was looking at her like that.

And then she noticed they weren't alone. Ram's awful friend from the evening before sat on a bench near the window. She met his gaze and saw only frost there.

What was happening?

"Ram? What's amiss? You're scaring me."

"You should be scared, Isabelle."

She flinched at the use of her full name. That never boded well. The ominous words were spat in her general direction, though he didn't make eye contact.

Looking around, she was frantic to find the source of the problem. "What's happened?"

"Your *friend* Paul came round earlier for a chat."

Her eyes widened, her mouth opened, but no sound came out. She could only stare at her husband's beloved face, wondering what Paul had done on her behalf.

Ram seemed to be in no rush to tell her, as he slowly paced back and forth before the seat she sat upon. He still hadn't looked her in the eye. Yet she knew him well enough to know he was struggling to keep his temper in check. Whatever had occurred between the two men must have been terrible indeed.

"So you told him of my Royalist sympathies, did you?"

She could feel the blood leave her face. *Oh, Paul, Nay! What have you done?*

"You had no success with blackmail on your own, so perhaps you thought your lover might have better luck?"

Blackmail? "Oh no…" Oh, dear, dear Paul had sought to help her secure the annulment he thought she still wanted so very badly.

"Oh aye, Isabelle, and you have betrayed me for the last time."

Every muscle in his face was clenched tight. His features blurred before her as her eyes filled with tears. She hurt because she had hurt him so. She stood on shaking legs and tried to put a hand to his cheek, but he knocked her arm away so hard she cried out and

stumbled back.

"*Do not* touch me. Not if you want to survive the next few minutes in one piece, Isabelle."

Staring in shock, she cradled her arm, knowing she would bruise from the force he just exerted against her.

"I-I didn't know he would do this, Ram. And he's not my lover. I only spoke with him about the circumstances because I needed a friend, and some advice."

"You spoke to him of this because you needed an annulment." His voice was flat.

She shook her head in denial.

"You've finally succeeded, Isabelle. You're going to get what you most desire. Huntley is welcome to you, for I sure as hell don't want you. He can take my leavings with my blessing, and I truly hope you get everything you deserve with him.

I'll seek the King, and beg his support in obtaining an annulment. In the meantime, all your belongings have been moved to a guest chamber, but I suggest you remove yourself to your father's townhouse, if he'll even take you when he learns you cost him everything your family needed. He finally looked directly at her. "Keep the hell out of my sight until I'm legally rid of you. Do I make myself clear?"

Hatred blazed in his eyes and Izzy recoiled.

She stared back, horrified. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a nightmare. He couldn't be telling her that *now* he wanted to annul their marriage, not when she'd finally realized how much she

loved him. She broke eye contact and stared at her feet, wondering what she could possibly do or say to make him understand.

His fingers bit into her flesh as he grabbed her chin and forced her head up. She whimpered, but not from the cruel grasp. She couldn't bear the loathing for her writ so clear across his face. No one had ever looked at her that way, and coming from him it brought an ache to her chest so acute, she couldn't breathe.

"Do you understand me?"

"Oh, Ramsay, nay," her eyes blurred; tears spilled onto her cheeks. "I don't want"-

His arm rose with fist clenched.

"Ram!" Lucien snapped.

With a vile oath, Ram released his painful grip and stepped back. "I don't *care* what you want, Isabelle. I'm done with you." His voice was clipped, angry. "I should have listened to you from the beginning. This *is* a marriage made in hell." He turned his back. "And I'll dance to the tune of this devil no longer," he shot over his shoulder, before he strode from the room.

# Chapter 26

Izzy watched Ram storm away, helpless to stop him from leaving. Holding her shoulders stiffly, she prayed he might change his mind and come back. The front door slammed with a crash so loud it reverberated throughout the house, shaking the walls. Wincing at the jarring sound, she slumped back against his desk, wrapping her arms about her middle in abject misery.

*What have I done?*

Covering her face with shaking hands, the tears flowed freely. There was a time—was it really only yesterday?—when she would have given anything to hear him say the words he'd just uttered. She'd prayed he'd come to his senses and grant her an annulment. She would have come to regret it, she knew that now.

"Don't you think you should save the histrionics for when Ram can see them, thus rendering them all the more effective?"

The callous and indifferent words came from the corner of the room, and she swiped at her wet face with open palms, furious for forgetting she wasn't alone and perversely furious at Lord Lucien for having witnessed her encounter with Ram. Turning, she glared in the general direction of Ram's friend.

"I don't believe this is any of your business, sir." Her voice dripped heavy with disdain. She desperately hoped he would take the hint and leave her to her misery.

"Perhaps not," he sauntered in her direction, his emerald green

eyes taking her measure from head to toe. “But perhaps I simply enjoy seeing the woman who hurt my closest friend receive her comeuppance?” With a flourish, he produced a snowy linen handkerchief from his waistcoat, presenting it to her- an action that belied his cruel words.

She took the offering, dabbing at her leaking eyes. When she returned her gaze to his, he was studying her as if trying to read her innermost thoughts.

“But perhaps my friend’s unrequited love is not so unrequited?” His tone softened and his eyebrow rose in a quizzical manner, indicating his was not a rhetorical question.

She absorbed the full impact of his words. “Are you saying Ram loves me?” Tears threatened all over again. “If he loves me, how could he walk out of here like that? How could he be so cruel?” *How can he hate me so very much?*

Lucien’s features hardened. “You are a shallow and daft woman if you don’t realize the depths of Ram’s feelings for you.”

“But I love him, too.” Her voice was all but a whisper.

Lucien snorted. “You have one hell of a strange manner of showing it.”

Her grip tightened upon the handkerchief so strongly her knuckles whitened. “I only just realized it,” she answered dejectedly, but even to her own ears, the explanation sounded lame.

“And would you care to enlighten me as to why it took you so long to realize that Paul Huntley isn’t half the man your husband is?”

She took umbrage at his denigration of Paul. “He means well.

Truly he does. Paul only thought to aid me-" She stopped short as Lucien took a step back against the desk, a look of horror crossing his face.

"Are you *defending* Huntley's actions to me? I was *here* when he called upon your husband."

"Nay. I mean, Paul wasn't trying to create trouble, he only meant to help."

Lucien advanced upon her. She tried to hold her ground, but faced with his towering height, the width of his shoulders and his scowling features, she took a step backwards. Good Lord, the man could be as intimidating as her husband. No wonder they were such good friends.

"You are twice the fool I took you for, my lady, and I do believe Ram will be far better off without you."

"Nay!" At his harsh words, the tears she'd struggled so hard to bring under control burst forth, this time in a torrent. "Nay. He needs me. And- and I love him." Her words were punctuated with small, pathetic hiccups. "I can't lose him. Not now, when I've only just realized how much I need him, too."

Sobbing in earnest, she felt like the biggest fool in the world for taking so long to recognize her true feelings, and for blubbering about them to Lord Lucien, when she should be having this discussion with her husband.

"Please," she whispered when she regained control of her voice. "I'd very much like to be alone now."

When she found the courage to meet his gaze, she was almost

undone by the compassion shining from Lucien's emerald eyes.

"Perhaps you ought give him time, until he's not so furious, and then attempt a more civil conversation. I've known Ram a very long time. His anger will burn itself out quickly enough." His voice was almost kind.

She nodded, confused by his shift in manner. When she tried to hand back his handkerchief, he waved her motion away. "Keep it."

She scarce noticed when he left the study, closing the door behind him gently. She slumped back against the desk.

*What am I to do now?*

Her head dropped back into her hands, but all of her tears had been used up. Wasted. Just like the brief time she'd had with Ram. She'd wasted it on silly schemes and childish infatuation.

Now, there were only two options left to her. She could stay and fight for what she wanted, or she could flee back home, throw herself on the mercy of her father, and find a safe place to lick her wounds. If her father would even accept her back into his home, that is.

Well, that couldn't be a deciding factor. She would stay and fight for Ram because she loved and needed him, not because she simply might have nowhere left to go.

With mind made up and shoulders squared, Izzy left the study. But she didn't call for Dexter. She wouldn't be going anywhere, and she certainly wouldn't be removing her belongings to her father's townhouse.

On quiet feet, she slipped up the stairs, her destination Ram's

bedchamber. She would wait there for him for as long as she must. When she faced her husband again, it would be in the volatile territory of the bedchamber, where they had raged at each other, known the heights of passion together, and ultimately fallen in love with one another.

There she would make her stand to win her heart's desire.

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Lord Lucien De Vere was no romantic at heart. In his nine and twenty years, he'd seen naught but misery come from relations between the opposite sexes when it came to that state of so called wedded bliss. Beginning with the tragedy that was his parents' ultimately loving marriage, to the eye-opening and sobering reality of what a woman would willingly put herself through to find a husband, he held no high regard for the holy state of matrimony. He thanked his maker daily that he'd not been born the eldest son, never more so as he'd watched the vapid and money hungry debutantes who had thrown themselves at his older brother, Max. The young women had seen nothing but an ancient family name, the future marquisate Max would someday inherit, and the fortune that went along with it- not caring a whit for the man beneath it all. His brother had done his duty, for as the heir it was imperative he marry and continue the noble family line, and for his troubles he'd ended up with a shrew for a wife. Granted, she was an extraordinarily beautiful shrew, but she made Max miserable most of the time. And to add insult to injury, she'd not yet even managed to breed that all important heir after nearly three years of marriage.

Lucien intended to remain unmarried until his dying day. Perpetual bachelorhood was a state he embraced whole-heartedly. But if the day ever came when he had to take a wife for some reason or another, he most certainly wouldn't choose a beautiful wife. Oh sure, his mistresses were reputed to be some of the most desirable women in the country. But then, there was a vast difference between a mistress and a wife, wasn't there? Beautiful women were nothing but trouble when it came to marriage. Just look at Ram's wife. She was a damned beautiful woman, a woman any man with eyes in his head would want beneath him. Yet barely married a handful of weeks and already she was leading him a merry chase.

But there was something about the way she'd looked when Ram had stormed out of the study. He'd seen the devastation in her eyes, the slump of defeat in her shoulders, and something about the dejection on her face had rung true.

Looking up at the darkening sky, he knew they were in for a late summer deluge. Hastening his pace, he swung himself up into his carriage.

*Who was he trying to fool?*

He certainly wanted his oldest friend to be happy. But he was no matchmaker. Meddling in his friend's marital nightmare was the perfect opportunity to call upon Izzy's cousin, Miss Spencer, whose name he'd discovered was Belinda. He'd not been able to get that chit out of his mind since they'd shared that scorching kiss on the balcony last night. That kiss in itself was puzzling; for she was not at all what one would describe an incredible beauty, as were the kind of women

he usually pursued for dalliance and such. Yet something about her intrigued him. Perhaps it had been her outrage at his forwardness, or her sweet and tentative response to his kiss. Whatever it was, a strong desire to see her again fueled him, and what better excuse, than to lend aid to their friends' fractured marriage?

To that end, he instructed his carriage driver to take him to the Beaumont residence, where discreet inquiries earlier in the day had yielded the information of Belinda's whereabouts whilst she resided in London.

Now he only had to decide what to say to her. A thoroughly unique position to find himself, for glib words usually flew from his tongue without thought when dealing with the fairer sex. Yet he sensed Belinda wasn't like most women. In fact, he feared she might prove to be impervious to the charm that worked so well on other women.

His carriage drew to a halt outside an elegant three-story town home. Leaping from the platform, he bounded up the front steps, using his walking stick to knock against the door.

An ancient and owl-eyed butler appeared, blinking as though he couldn't quite see straight.

"Is Miss Spencer in?"

The butler appeared taken aback for a moment, before quickly recovering his decorum. "Who may I say is calling, sir?"

"Tell her it is a gentleman who made her acquaintance last evening and was quite taken with her."

The butler didn't miss a beat. "Very good, sir. If you'll just wait

here but a moment, I will see if Miss Spencer is in."

The staid butler shuffled away, and Lucien couldn't help but wonder at his surprise. Belatedly he realized he'd come empty handed, and wished he'd had the foresight to bring along a gift of some sort. A peace offering if you will.

He leaned against the door, studying his surroundings as he waited. He stood inside an elegantly decorated foyer, though with a faint musty odor that still clung, as though the house had only recently been reopened and aired.

And then he heard her voice, as she approached the foyer from the direction of the back of the house. "Thomas, you must be mistaken. You know I never receive gentlemen callers. Are you sure it's not a gentleman come looking for Izzy?" Her voice was hushed.

"I'm not mistaken, little miss. My eyesight might be shot, but I still have my hearing, despite what the missus would tell you."

The butler's words might be construed as extremely insubordinate, if the note of affection in the tone wasn't so clear. A smile pulled at Lucien's lips. It said much about a woman who held the loyalty of her staff. And also solved the mystery of the old man's surprise. So, Miss Spencer didn't often receive gentlemen callers? Interesting.

"I'm telling you, Thomas-" her voice trailed off abruptly as she clapped eyes upon him standing in the foyer. "You!"

Lucien couldn't prevent a grin from slipping out as he straightened himself from the wall. Not one for formalities was his Belinda, apparently.

*His Belinda?* Hell, where had that thought come from?

"It's a pleasure to see you again as well, Miss Spencer." He bowed slightly, using the opportunity as he righted himself to study her. She looked much different than she had at court where she'd been done up in all her finery. Mousy wasn't quite the word he'd choose to describe her. Nondescript seemed more apt, the way she stood before him now, with her dark blonde hair pulled back severely, and a book held loosely in her hand, as if she'd meant only to come to the door to prove the caller wasn't for her, then return to her reading. Her prim, pale blue day gown covered her from neck to ankle, leaving everything to the imagination.

But he'd held her in his arms for the briefest of moments on that terrace, and his imagination needed no urging to supply him with the memory of the curves hidden beneath her plain clothing.

She was frowning. From his observance last evening and the two minutes he'd been in her presence today, she did that a lot. It brought out an urge in him to make her smile.

Which was all so very intriguing. Frowning, *nondescript* women were not the type to attract his notice.

"Tsk tsk, Miss Spencer. If this is the way you treat all your visitors, it's no wonder you receive so few."

Her cheeks pinkened as it dawned on her he'd overheard her comment to her butler. Amused, he watched her struggle to bring her ire under control. Ah, she was so much fun to tease!

"What is it I can do for you, Lord Lucien?"

He nodded toward a parlor situated off the foyer. "May we

speak for a moment?"

Her brow crinkled in confusion, but she nodded anyway, leading him into the room. She took a seat, sitting gingerly on the edge, waiting for him to speak.

He grew serious. "I'm afraid the tidings I bring are not good ones." Worry immediately leapt into her eyes. She had such an expressive face. Had he really thought her nondescript? Upon close examination in the well-lit parlor, he revised his opinion. Her features were what might be described as unusual. Her cheekbones were very high and narrow, her eyes almond shaped, slanted upwards at the corners, their blue color reminding him almost of a Siamese cat, though thankfully without the cross-eyed effect. Her nose too, was narrow, dusted with freckles, but the end tipped up in an adorable manner. Her bow shaped lips, a pearly pink hue, rested above a chin that was almost too wide within her narrow face, yet had the most arresting cleft in the middle. No, she wasn't plain, though nor was she beautiful. His mind sought about for some word to describe her. *Exotic*. Yes, her features were very exotic.

"As we hardly know one another, your statement is very disturbing. Please, tell me of these tidings you speak of."

Her voice jolted him back to the reason for the visit. "I'm afraid things have gone terribly amiss between Ram and Izzy."

"Did something happen to Izzy? Is she alright?" Gone was the demure and distant hostess. In her place was a concerned woman, who dropped all pretenses at the possibility her cousin might be in trouble. His opinion of her rose another notch.

She leaned forward, agitated. “I saw her not very long ago and she was so happy. What happened?”

“While Izzy was here with you, your friend, Paul Huntley, called on Ram.”

She frowned, rolling her eyes at the same time. “He is *not* my friend, as you well know. And, oh dear, if Paul came to see Ram, he could only have trouble in mind. What did he do?”

“He’s trying to blackmail Ram.”

“Oh dear,” she whispered again. “But what has that to do with Izzy?”

Lucien studied her closely, wondering how much she knew about Ram’s royalist sympathies. But her eyes were wide and guileless as she waited on him to continue. “The information he threatened to reveal was told to him by Izzy. Ram believes Izzy asked for Paul’s help to attain an annulment.”

Belinda clamped a hand over her mouth in horror, eyes widening even more. Slowly, she lowered the hand. “Ram thinks Paul blackmailed him at *Izzy’s* request?”

He nodded.

“But Izzy doesn’t want an annulment. She loves Ram.”

Lucien nodded again. “I agreed with Ram at first to the contrary, but having spoken with your cousin I’m inclined to agree with you. She didn’t ask Paul to do this for her, though she did supply him with the information.”

“If she did, her intention was never for this purpose. She has misplaced faith in him. Is she all right?”

Misplaced faith was an understatement. He shook his head. “Ram told her the marriage is over. He’s asked her to leave the house. She’s devastated, of course. Which is why I’ve come here to see you, as I think you ought to go to her. She needs you. I’m going to try to find Ram and see if I can get him to cool down enough to at least be in the same room with her.”

“You don’t sound very optimistic.”

“Your cousin seems to have a blind spot when it comes to Paul Huntley. She believes he meant no harm, and in fact was only trying to help her by his actions. Unless you can keep her from defending what Huntley did, I don’t think anything will convince Ram of her feelings for him.”

“Yes, of course.” She stood from the chair in an angry, yet controlled gesture, and began to pace. “Paul has always been a rat, but I never imagined his perfidy would lead him down the path of blackmail.”

“Any man who would force an unwilling woman holds little reservations and no scruples when it comes to any sort of behavior that might gain him what he most desires.”

At the quiet reminder of what had occurred on the balcony, she stopped pacing and turned to face him. A faint blush stained her cheeks. “You’re right.” Suddenly she seemed shy, her eyes downcast as she concentrated on the fingers she twisted together before her. “And I never did thank you properly for your help last evening.”

Treading on silent feet to stand before her, he placed his hand beneath her chin and gently raised her face to look into her luminous

eyes. “There’s no need to thank me. And I apologize for acting like a cad once Huntley was gone. I merely saved you from one situation only to plunge you into a similar one.”

“Nay!” her denial came quickly. “It wasn’t nearly the same!”

As though realizing what she just admitted, her color heightened again.

Struggling to hide his amusement, he cupped her cheek in his palm. “Please, call me Lucien.”

She nodded uncertainly. “I *am* very grateful for your help, Lucien.”

“It was my pleasure.” His voice took on a husky tone, unable to stop his thoughts from reviving the memory of the kiss they’d shared. His thumb rubbed over the ridge of her cheek.

For one moment they stood there, a scant breath apart. So close to her, he could see the translucent blue lines that ran beneath her eyelids, see the dark blonde lashes that dusted her cheeks as her eyes drifted closed. She was ripe for kissing, and he fought every desire in his body to lean in and steal a kiss. He would meet with no resistance.

But for once, common sense prevailed. Izzy and Ram needed their interference. Now was not the time to woo a shy maiden.

Removing his hand from her cheek, he took a step back, creating an invisible barrier of safety between them. “Shall I take you to Ram’s? I believe Izzy might still be there.”

Belinda seemed to snap out of the trance that had formed around them. She retreated a step as she contemplated his offer, but shook her head. She seemed almost disheartened to tell him nay, and

that was absurdly pleasing.

“I should remain here in case she comes here. If she doesn’t return in a reasonable amount of time, I shall take the carriage and go after her.”

“Your idea has merit. And you know your cousin best.” meritorious her idea may be, but it would have been nice to have gotten her alone for a while in *his* carriage. He sighed in resignation. “Let’s see if we can’t fix what our friends are too stubborn to do for themselves, shall we?” he announced in a cheery voice.

“Belinda, it’s been a pleasure,” he took her hand, pressing a kiss to the back of it. The little gasp that escaped her lips was so innocent it instantly aroused him. What an intriguing creature Miss Spencer was. “I hope we’ll see one another again, under more pleasurable circumstances.”

A pink blush covered her face, and he was enchanted. Most of the women he knew had long ago lost the ability to blush.

“Good day, Lucien.” She whispered.

Leaving was more difficult than he’d have ever expected.

# Chapter 27

Ram returned home in an even fouler mood than when he'd left, if that was at all possible. He'd accomplished nothing at court, and there was no one to lay the blame with for that. White Hall was in a state of mourning and pandemonium. Mourning because the King's sister, Mary, Princess of Orange, visiting from Holland, had succumbed to smallpox during the night. And pandemonium reigned, because fear of contagion was fast spreading throughout the court and courtiers were making arrangements in haste to flee to their homes outside of London, in the hopes of avoiding the dreaded disease.

He'd spoken with Charles only briefly and then only to express his sympathies over the loss of his beloved sister. The King had remained by her side to the end, nursing her. Some thought it was the height of bravery, but Ram knew that Charles, like himself, had been exposed to Smallpox as a youngster and stood no danger of becoming infected.

*Christ. Izzy had turned him into a pessimist.*

Nursing his sister himself showed his dedication and love for her. Charles was devastated; it was neither the time to make requests nor ask for favors. Not while Charles dealt with the sobering reality that while being King meant he had everything he could ever need at his beck and call, he still held no control over the forces of nature. It had only been months since he'd lost his beloved brother Henry, Duke of Gloucester, also to smallpox. The loss of the Princess was a double

blow. Death respected neither royalty nor nobility, and for the young king it was a bitter pill to swallow.

The annulment would have to wait, a reality that didn't sit well with Ram. In fact, he'd been in such a rank mood when he'd left White Hall, he'd made a rare stop at a pub to drown his misery with some liquor and the cheerful company of the publican.

It hadn't helped.

Making his way home, he'd been grateful at least he wouldn't have to deal with Izzy's presence. He'd been gone long enough, she should have had ample opportunity to remove her belongings to her father's house, or wherever it was she would be decide to stay. And he was getting good at pretending he didn't care where she went, even as part of him braced for the eventuality she'd soon be set up in a fine house by Huntley, the same way Ram had set up houses for the mistresses of his past.

Dexter was conspicuously absent when Ram arrived home, which set off internal alarm bells. The butler never missed greeting him at the door.

The house was shrouded in an almost unholy silence, as if all the living creatures within had taken shelter from some danger into the deepest bowels of the house. Frowning, he made his way up the stairs and toward his bedchamber.

He stopped short on the threshold.

Izzy was asleep in the bed. And not just in the bed, on his side of the bed, her arms wrapped tightly about his pillow.

No wonder the servants had made themselves scarce. They

knew he'd be livid upon finding her thus.

And he was.

It wasn't enough for the woman to betray him, and possibly cuckold him as well. She was intent on wreaking havoc with his emotions, and he'd had more than enough.

Striding angrily to the foot of the bed, he grasped the coverlet and yanked it roughly from her sleeping form. Denied the warmth she'd been snuggling into in her slumber, she awoke, looking around in confusion before settling her gaze upon him.

"Ram. You're home." There was no censure in her voice, but from her tone it was clear she'd waited on him for quite some time.

"What the hell are you doing here, Isabelle? I know I made my feelings about you presence here perfectly clear!"

She blinked. "I— we need— I wanted to talk to you. Now that you aren't so angry"

"I know I also made it profusely clear I was done talking to you about anything. And I'm still abundantly furious. I've just come from Court where I saw the King. He's agreed to help me." He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing his objective had been frustrated that day. He would get his annulment, no matter how much it cost or how long the wait.

Some emotion he couldn't name flickered in her eyes, but he would *not* convince himself it was grief.

"Nor do I have time to talk to you, even if I had the least desire to do so." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm seeing Louisa this evening," he lied.

He heard the sharp breath she sucked in.

"Oh."

This time there was no mistaking the hurt that flared brightly in her eyes. Her shoulders slumped and all the wind seemed to go out of her. She stared at her lap, a look of defeat on her face.

Petty though it might be, hurting her filled him with a savage satisfaction in light of the pain she'd caused him. "State what you came to say and then get the hell out, Isabelle."

She swallowed hard. "Don't do this, Ram! Please don't go to her. I-I can't bear it."

"You're making *demands* of *me* now? You lost that right when you betrayed me for your precious Paul!" Her audacity was astounding. Mind boggling, even. "You can't bear it? Why, Isabelle? Because then she'll know the truth and soon everyone at court will know it too? That what you told her last night was an utter lie and that I regret marrying you more than I've ever regretted anything in my entire life? I don't care if you're humiliated before the entire world!" He struggled to control his fury. "You reap what you sow, and you'll just have to learn to live with it, I'm afraid. As far as I'm concerned our sham of a marriage is over, the annulment only a formality. I owe you neither consideration nor fidelity. I owe you *nothing*."

She flinched and went pale. "I-I couldn't bear it because I don't want our marriage annulled, Ramsay." Her voice was husky. "I can't bear to think of you in her bed." A single tear rolled down her cheek.

His fists clenched at his side. He studied her for a tense

moment, trying to decipher what she was scheming for this time. She slowly righted herself in the bed and against his better judgment he took notice that although she wore her gown, she'd removed her stockings and shoes before lying down.

He tore his gaze from her legs and returned it to her face. "You made good use of the time I was gone, I see."

"What?"

"Let me make a wild guess. You also went to White Hall. And you found Huntley, who told you he had no interest in marrying you and that his sole interest lay in padding his coffers?"

"What? Ram, nay"-

"And then I'm guessing you went on to see your father, who made it clear you are unwelcome back in his home. So you've returned here because you have no place else to go. Is my assessment correct? Does that about sum it all up?"

"Your assessment is ridiculous." A spark of the Izzy he knew best made an appearance with her angry declaration. "I haven't left the house since you stormed out earlier today."

He snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. He'd play her game for a little while and discover just what she was after. "So why then do you suddenly wish to remain married to me so badly?"

Her gaze dropped to her fingers, which were twisting the hem of her gown. He watched her chest rise as she sucked in a breath and then lifted her face. Her eyes swam with tears that didn't fall. God, she had a flare for theatrics.

"Because, I love you."

Admiration fled as emotion hit him like a punch to the gut. And with it came a fury more potent than he'd ever felt, that she would play with him this way. Did she *truly* expect him to believe that, *now*? His bloodied heart couldn't take anymore of her callousness or her lies. She just proved beyond any doubt that she was more than willing to say anything necessary to gain what she desired.

"That's too bad, isn't it, for I don't love *you*, Isabelle, not one God damned bit. Nor do I want you as my wife any longer."

She flinched. "Then I'll be your mistress, if you'll have me. You don't need to seek Louisa! I know you desire me, even if you don't love me."

He couldn't hide his incredulity. "What you would be is a whore, Izzy, trading your body for a place to live and a few stolen moments of pleasure."

"Then I'll be your whore." Her voice didn't even waver.

Did she need a place to live so very badly she would use her body as a commodity? Or could he have misread her so thoroughly, missed her feelings for him?

His jaw tightened. Nay. He need only remind himself of Huntley's visit earlier in the day. She'd colluded with the man, there was no denying it. She hadn't even tried to deny it! And now that Huntley had betrayed her, and not used the information for the purposes for which she gave it to him, she was trapped, desperate.

"Huntley wouldn't take you up on the same offer then?"

"I never went to Paul. If I did, he would gladly accept me as his wife, but I don't want him, I want"-

He exhaled a sound of disbelief. “Are you *still* extolling that man’s virtues to me after what he did this afternoon?”

“He only thought he was helping, Ram. I *know* Paul, and what he did, he thought he did for me.”

“Then why did he ask only for coin, Izzy, and not for an annulment so he could have you, since you seem to think you are what he wants so badly?”

She met his stare. “Because he knew *this* would happen. You never would have agreed to an annulment, but he knew if you thought I conspired with him to blackmail you, then you would want an annulment. I’m sure of it.”

Her faith in Huntley knew no bounds. And her willingness to ignore the vile cad in the man nearly gutted him. If her instincts about Huntley were so wrong, there was no way Ram could rely on her declaration of love for him, even if she truly thought she believed it. His heart unwillingly twisted with disappointment. “You certainly seem to know his mind very well, considering you didn’t see him today.”

She flushed. “I didn’t have to see him. I just know.”

He turned away. “You know nothing, Izzy. Go back to your precious Paul; he’ll be happy to make you his mistress.”

“He would make me his wife. But I don’t want to be his wife, I want to be yours. And if you won’t accept that, I’ll be anything you want me to be.”

God, the offer tempted him beyond belief. Because no matter how angry he was, his heart kept butting in to remind him that he

loved her above all else. Burned for her more than anything he ever wanted before in his life. But if he put his heart at her mercy she would eventually shred it. The only way to save himself was to drive her as far away as possible. This very moment.

He turned back to face her. “You offered to be my whore, Izzy. Do you know the difference between a mistress and a whore?”

Her glistening eyes remained fixed on his. She shook her head.

“A mistress is a valued companion. Carefully chosen, because a mistress can very often be both a friend and a lover. A whore exists for one purpose only- to be at the disposal of the man paying for her to ease his body’s needs. Are you still willing to be my whore then, Isabelle?”

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and she nodded. Obviously she *didn’t* truly understand the nuance betwixt the two. He would give her a demonstration she’d not soon forget.

“I accept your offer, then. And I require your services right now.” He closed some of the distance to the bed.

Suddenly she looked nervous. “W-what would you have me do, my lord?”

“You need do nothing more than simply toss your skirts over your head. A whore is merely a willing body and need not be a willing participant.”

She licked her lips again. “What if I desire to be a willing participant?”

He shrugged, though her words made him burn. The point of this was to teach her a lesson that would drive her away, nothing

more. “I do not wish it.” He stared at her when she didn’t move. “Your skirts, Isabelle?”

He just barely kept his jaw from dropping when she shimmied up the bed until her head rested upon the pillow. Never taking her eyes from his, she drew the hem of her gown up slowly. He couldn’t stop his own gaze from flicking downwards to stare at the creamy thighs revealed by the action. She stopped when the gown was bunched about her waist.

“I said over your head,” He gritted.

Her knuckles tightened on the hem at the insulting demand, but she did as he commanded.

He stepped closer to the bed. *How far will she go?*

“Bring your legs up and spread your thighs for me, Izzy,” his voice came out thicker than he intended.

Without hesitation, she drew her legs up until her feet rested flat upon the mattress and then spread her legs. His cock, which had merely been half-hard at the sight of her laid out on his bed, sprang to full attention as his gaze narrowed in on her pink slit glistening with evidence of her desire.

“Wider,” he forced through his teeth.

Again, she complied, and his intention to only teach her a demeaning lesson went awry. Desire shot through him, beginning as a curling of heat that grew into a conflagration that soon licked at him. His control shattered. He had to have her, annulment be damned.

His hands moved to the fastenings of his breeches, pushing them down to pool at his ankles, and then he was on the bed, lying

between her legs, the heat from her center scorching him.

"Lift your legs." His voice was no longer demanding, rather he sounded like he was pleading. He was losing control of the situation, but his heated body overruled his rapidly fogging brain. She pulled her raised knees towards her chest and he watched in fascination as her body opened of its own accord.

Without pause he drove into her welcoming, slick heat, groaning at the exquisite pleasure of her body shuddering around his. And suddenly, no matter his intention, it was all wrong for her beautiful face to be covered while they were together like this, and he lowered her skirt gently to her waist. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes closed tight. He couldn't tell if her heightened color was brought on by pleasure or shame.

He began to thrust in long, slow motions; withdrawing almost completely from her body, then driving back in, deeper and deeper each time. The color in her face heightened and soon she was moaning sweetly with every plunge he made into her heated depths. Her hands rose up and encircled his neck, her nails clawing at him, begging wordlessly for him to bring her to climax. She tried to drag his lips down to hers, but he turned his face away at the last moment, suckling her neck instead. She stiffened slightly in response, but then he was thrusting so hard and so fast, she surrendered beneath him. Breathy mewls escaped her lips and she whimpered and gasped, until she suddenly went taut beneath him, crying out. The shuddering of her body urged him on to release.

At the last instant, commonsense prevailed. He must *not*

impregnate her. The pressure intensified, the pleasure almost overwhelming, but somehow he reached deep and found the willpower to pull out of her tight sheath before he spilled his seed, exploding in a white-hot burst of bliss with a gasp. He opened his eyes in time to watch the last of his semen pump from him, landing on the silken sheets beside her leg.

He clenched his eyes shut, holding himself up on his arms, breathing harshly. *Thank God*. If he planted a babe inside of her, he'd never get the annulment. Even if his heart whispered that would not be a bad thing.

For a moment there was only silence as they recovered from the force of expended passion. But all too soon Izzy opened wounded eyes and stared at him, her face the very picture of hurt bewilderment.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, her voice so soft he wouldn't have heard the question if his face wasn't so close to hers.

Somehow he managed not to flinch. He knew without asking to what she referred and now the time had come to chase her away for good. He steeled himself to be harsh. Under no circumstances could she know of the tenderness he still felt for her, despite everything.

"A man usually doesn't wish to impregnate his mistress, but he most certainly doesn't want to father a child on a whore."

As soon as the callous words left his mouth he wanted to snatch them back. He was still lying between her legs for Christ's sake, the warm afterglow of lovemaking still heavy between them despite the way it had began. And she *was* his wife, not some two-penny whore

he'd picked up outside of a seedy tavern for a quick fuck against the wall.

Her luminous eyes widened and filled with tears. Her lips began to tremble, but she took the lower one between her teeth, as though that could stop the quiver. One fat tear trickled down her cheek despite her obvious effort to control it. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed to resist gently wiping it away with his thumb. These tears were no act. He'd been unbearably cruel.

"You really meant it then?" Her voice was whisper soft.

He sighed heavily, trying hard to ignore the ache in his heart. "I don't want you for my wife, Isabelle, and there's no place in my life for you as my mistress."

"Then you weren't just saying it to be unkind? You could really use me as a whore?" She squared her shoulders before he could form an answer. "Never mind. You just did. I was the fool to believe otherwise." She shook her head. "I have decided I cannot be your whore after all. It hurts entirely too much." She pushed against his chest and he sat back, freeing her from his embrace, watching as she lowered her gown into place and sat upright. She hugged her knees, looking small and so very vulnerable. When she raised her head and lifted pleading eyes to his, he braced himself to resist whatever she begged of him.

"I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but please, Ramsay, I'm begging you, *please*, for God's sake, don't offer me any sort of payment for what just happened." A sob escaped with the last word and she clamped her mouth shut, visibly trembling.

He let out a breath and looked away. He'd been about to do just that; to put the final nail in the coffin of their marriage. He could indulge her in this, because it was no longer necessary. She finally understood.

After a moment, she stood from the bed, smoothing the fabric of her gown against her hips with shaking hands, then placed her fingertips against her forehead, eyes closed. "I'm returning to my father's home in Cornwall. Please send word to me there when the annulment is official."

She stared at him as if she expected some response, so he nodded. It was the only action of which he was capable.

"I wish you well, Ramsay, I truly do. If it's worth anything, I'm so very sorry for everything." She turned toward the door, shoulders squared.

"Izzy!" he forced out.

She swung about abruptly, hope flaring to life in her eyes.

"If you find yourself with child, you'll let me know immediately, do you hear me?"

Hope faded to bleak acceptance. Her mouth closed, then opened, then closed once more. The tears she'd fought so hard reappeared, but now they rolled down her cheeks, one after another, as if she'd lost the strength or the will hold them back any longer. She nodded once, her face a picture of anguish.

She fled the chamber.

Ram should have been relieved, but instead the ache in his chest grew stronger. *What if he'd just made a terrible mistake?*

# Chapter 28

Izzy watched the gray buildings pass by as she peered through the curtain of the Royston coach. All she could think about was how each turn of the wheels took her farther and farther from Ram, and that in all likelihood she'd never see him again. From the moment he explained the humiliating reason for withdrawing before he spent, a hollow ache settled in her chest. Nay, it had begun even before that, when he refused to kiss her. She felt used. And yet, she couldn't blame him, for he'd warned her what to expect. It was only that she'd thought him bluffing- that if only he'd take her in his arms…

The ache only grew stronger with each step she took away from the bedchamber, culminating in what felt like an iron anchor crushing her torso, weighing her down, as she stumbled into the carriage, barely managing to whisper her destination to the driver through her tears.

*So, this is what a broken heart* truly *feels like.*

Broken was the wrong word for it. It was far too tame. Her heart had been mauled. Shredded. She thought she'd known heartbreak when Papa betrothed her to Ram and she'd lost Paul- but that was *nothing* compared to this devastation. How did one survive such a thing? Did people ever recover from broken hearts, or did they forever remain empty shells of their former selves, pining for the love they'd lost?

And she would pine for Ram, every day for the rest of her life,

of that there could be no doubt. There would be no second marriage for her. Not once the scandal of the annulment came down upon her. And upon her family. But even if there were no scandal, she wouldn't remarry. She'd made the mistake once of marrying a man while believing herself in love with another, and she'd hurt her husband terribly. She would never do that to anyone, ever again.

There was no help for it now. She'd brought this upon herself, and she'd have to live with the consequences of her actions. But first, she'd do one last thing for Ram.

The carriage slowed before the steps of her father's townhouse and Izzy alighted with the aid of the driver, carrying with her one small bag. She'd asked Dexter to send her belongings, along with Meg, later in the day, so they could travel to Cornwall together.

With a weak smile of thanks, she sent the Royston driver back home for the last time, insisting he needn't wait. Nothing that was Ram's belonged to her anymore.

Especially not his heart.

She bit her knuckle to hold back tears that waited so desperately for release. It would be unseemly to collapse into a puddle of hysterics on the front steps of her father's home. She was a grown woman, it wouldn't do to be seen in such a manner.

*You are no woman. You are nothing but a silly child.*

The green damask curtain fluttering back into place from the parlor caught her attention, and within seconds, the front door crashed open before Izzy could even summon the energy to knock upon it. Belinda bore down on her, her face a mask of utmost concern,

which piqued Izzy's curiosity. When she'd left here this afternoon, she'd been so happy and excited. Why then did Bel seem to know the worst had happened?

Belinda reached for the bag with one hand, while wrapping the other arm about Izzy's waist. Grateful for the support, she leaned into her cousin as Bel led her into the house, back into the parlor where they'd spoken only this morn.

Izzy fell onto the settee, pressing her fingertips to her eyes. "You're probably wondering what happened, since when last I saw you everything was fine." Her voice didn't sound like her own; it was a stranger's voice, filled with exhaustion and despair.

Belinda sat beside her, took her hand. "I saw Lucien earlier," her tone was gentle. "He told me what happened."

"Lord Lucien? What business did you have with him? I wasn't even aware you were acquainted."

Was that a flush on her cousin's face?

"We met last evening. He came here this afternoon as a courtesy, to tell me what happened between you and Ram. He thought I should go to you, but I decided to remain here, thinking you would return. Then your parents came home and took the carriage to Eric's manor, so I couldn't go to you. When I wouldn't leave, your father demanded to know why. I had to tell him part of the truth Izzy, I'm so sorry. He promised to return the carriage as soon as they arrived. Your father wishes for us to join them straight away."

"Why are they going Eric's estate? Is he well?" The King had granted the manor to Eric for his years of service to the crown, but

Izzy had not yet had a chance to see it.

Belinda's face grew even more sober, if it were at all possible. "Oh, Izzy, you haven't heard the news from court?"

"Nay. I've seen none but you, Ram, and Lord Lucien today. What's happened? You're scaring me."

"Princess Mary died in the night, Izzy. Of smallpox. Everyone is fleeing for fear of contagion."

"Oh! Poor Mary! And poor Charles!" Her heart ached for her monarch's pain.

"'Tis so tragic. So soon on the heels of Henry's death and just when everything should be happiest for Charles, he loses another sibling to this awful disease."

It was dreadful. How awful for Charles. "Papa is right, we should go to the country."

"I'm sure the carriage will return in the night, we can leave early in the morning."

"Are you positive Papa meant for me to come as well?"

Belinda's face lit and she leapt from the settee and went to a table. When she returned she handed a sealed envelope to Izzy. "He left this for you," Bel explained, softly.

Izzy's heart pounded when she recognized her father's seal and she tore the missive open. How she longed for Papa's forgiveness and love, especially now. She eagerly scanned the contents of the page.

*Lady Royston,*

*Grave rumors I can scarce countenance have reached me from*

*court that your husband intends to seek an annulment. I did not give credence to the ugly gossip, despite the credibility of the source. Belinda's refusal to flee London with us, and the reasons she gave for her refusal have forced me to wonder if there might indeed be truth to the rumor. I have considered carefully the ramifications to all if the tales from court are true and my duty is clear. I must protect my family at all cost. Therefore, in light of what transpired on your wedding day, and the devastation a scandal would cause my wife, along with what my sons stand to lose should there be an annulment, I have no choice but to bar both my door and my heart against you. I pray for all our sakes the rumors are false.*

*Belinda would stay at your side despite the damage to her reputation and the harm a scandal would cause to her chance of making a good match. I entreat you for once to do what is best for her health and reputation and ensure she joins my wife and I in the country at the earliest convenience. As her guardian, I will brook no disobedience on this matter. If your husband is at your side, I extend to the both of you an invitation to join us.*

*Gerald, Baron Beaumont*

Izzy blinked back desperate tears as she reread Papa's impersonal words a second time. Papa hadn't forgiven her at all, not even the slightest. He'd written as if she were a stranger, not a member of his family. His meaning was clear. If Ram sought an annulment the blame would be hers alone, for what she'd done on her wedding day. Papa was correct, of course; she was to blame. But even still, she'd hoped for compassion and the comfort of home while she

nursed her broken heart. There would be no love and support from that quarter during this most trying time.

It could only be Clarendon who would have passed on the news of her impending annulment, for he was privy to most of the king's business, and the only man from court Papa would place any belief in. Ram truly did raise the issue with the king, then. He hadn't lied only to hurt her. Her throat constricted.

She tried to tamp down the bitterness. She understood why Papa had made the choice he had, she truly did. But he hadn't spared a thought for the ramifications of his decision to *her*. What was she to do now? Where could she possibly go? What would become of her?

She carefully folded the letter and placed it in her reticule while she tried to compose herself. Now was not a time for selfish introspection. Moreover, she at least agreed with her father on one issue. No matter how she needed Belinda, Izzy couldn't selfishly keep her cousin by her side throughout what was to come. Belinda would throw her reputation away for Izzy's sake with nary a second thought, but Izzy wouldn't let Belinda ruin her future on her behalf. She wasn't worth it. She'd already hurt nearly everyone she loved, she refused to add Belinda to the list by dragging her into the mess Izzy had made of her life. Izzy would panic about where she'd live once this more immediate crisis had passed.

Pasting on a smile, Izzy turned to an anxious Belinda. "Well, that's a relief!" She exclaimed brightly. "'Twill be good to get away from London at a time like this."

"So we'll leave first thing in the morning then?"

Izzy nodded. “There’s one quick errand I must complete before we depart, but it will take no time at all.”

Belinda’s brow wrinkled. “What’s so important that it can’t wait until we can safely return?”

“I must speak to Paul. It cannot wait.”

Her cousin gasped. “Are you *mad*? After what he did to Ram this afternoon?”

“Why must everyone think the worst of him?” Izzy swallowed her exasperation. “He simply wishes to help. I must make sure he realizes I no longer wish for his aid. It would be truly terrible if he did go to Ram’s father with what he knows, and I’ll not allow Ram to suffer because of me.”

“He’ll have most likely fled from court.”

“I need to be sure.”

“Izzy, you *cannot* go there. ‘Tis not safe.”

“I don’t care, Bel. If Paul is still there, I must stop him before something dreadful happens. I only need to explain it to him, and all will be well. I shan’t be there long.”

“Would you risk your life just to prevent a row between Ram and his father?”

Her eyes filled with frustrated tears as she thought of her own father, how long it had been since he’d gazed at her with paternal fondness of any sort. “I will not be the cause of discord betwixt Ram and his father. The Earl might well disinherit Ram if he ever discovers what Ram did! Cromwell could have destroyed the entire family if Ram’s actions had come to light.” She lowered her voice. “And surely

a few minutes at White Hall will not lead to contagion."

"Ram would not want you to do this for him, not at the risk of your own safety. Surely you cannot mean this to be a way to make amends with him?"

That awful, hollow ache filled Izzy's chest again. "There will be no amends made. Ram doesn't want anything from me," she whispered. "Not ever again."

The tears came then, scalding hot.

"Oh Izzy, Izzy, I'm so very sorry." Belinda hugged her, stroking her hair, making soothing sounds. "I know it all seems awful right now, but perhaps with some time and distance"-

"Nay"- She choked. "There will be no making this right. What I did was too awful to forgive and he has every right to hate me. I betrayed him to another man." She clutched at Belinda tightly. "I only wish it didn't hurt so very much."

"Oh, Izzy." Belinda took her wet cheeks in her hand. "I know it hurts. But please, I beg of you, do not go to court looking for Paul. I could not abide it if you became ill. Do not do this thing!"

Belinda's face was so wrought with concern, Izzy couldn't bear to argue with her. It also came to her in a flash how to achieve both of her objectives. She'd find Paul if he'd not yet left London, and she'd ensure Belinda went safely to Eric's.

Izzy nodded, feigning resignation. "We'll go to Eric's in the morning."

As the morning sun began to make its appearance, Izzy lifted her weary body from the bed beside Belinda as quietly as possible. A

night spent tossing and turning with worry hadn't changed her mind. Fear that she'd be too late and miss Paul coupled with the torture of imagining Ram in Louisa's arms had kept her from resting well. Both her head and her back ached and she was exhausted. Still, she must find Paul if he was still in London.

She stood beside the bed staring at Belinda's sleeping form. She prayed that Belinda wouldn't hate her when she discovered what she had done. She turned away, her heart wrenching with despair. She'd never felt so alone in her life.

The thought of meeting with anyone, even Paul, while her emotions were so fragile, hardly appealed, but she had to do this for Ram. Paul needed to know the annulment was already a sure thing, and that he need not go through with his threats. There was no faster way to ensure Ram's secret remained a secret. And if Paul were no longer at court, a steward might be able to inform her as to where he'd gone.

Pain lanced through her chest at the thought of her impending annulment. Oh, to be sure, there would be a delay due to the death of the King's sister. All official business would halt during the time of mourning. But that, like everything else, would pass, and life would resume as usual. Except for hers. Once the annulment was an actuality, life as she knew it would cease. What lay before her was a complete unknown, but without Ram or her family the future she faced was bleak

Forcing the maudlin thoughts away, Izzy moved carefully, listening for any change in the pattern of Belinda's breathing that

might indicate she were awake. It had always been a lucky happenstance her cousin slept like the dead.

On silent feet, she slipped into a dark blue taffeta gown suitable for mourning. She fastened her sapphires in her ears, leaving off the matching necklace that was too bright for this time of grief; both the court's and her own. 'Twas silly, she knew it was, but somehow, wearing the earrings Ram had bought for her in better times made her feel closer to him. She bundled the rest of her belongings into her small bag, and tiptoed down the stairs. The carriage had indeed returned in the middle of the night, and Thomas saw nothing untoward at her request to have it brought round.

She would go to White Hall as planned, but she would not go to Eric. She would take the carriage to Portsmouth and book passage to Fowey. At Portsmouth she'd send the carriage back. Belinda's departure would be delayed only by a few hours.

The driver was hesitant when she gave him her destination and all but balked at taking her to White Hall. She assured Laurence he could await her beyond the Holbein gate, then, with a deep breath, she entered the ancient complex.

Never had she seen the streets around White Hall so empty. What traffic that existed raced against each other to make it out. Inside, she saw very few people aside from palace servants. The maze and hallway of the buildings were deserted. An anxious steward stepped into her path and attempted to dissuade her from entering St. James, but nothing would stop her now. The steward washed his hands of her with a mumbled comment about Bedlam, and Izzy

proceeded unimpeded into the warren of hallways that were the domains of the courtiers.

As her eyes adjusted to the dimness that pervaded the hallways, her feet unerringly followed the path of what she knew from her previous visit to court were Paul's' private chambers. Apparently the servants had fled as well, for piles of linen were stacked in doorways and the hall lanterns remained unlit. Doubt assailed her for the first time since she'd embarked upon this crusade. Perhaps this wasn't her wisest decision, after all. Oh, well. She need only add it to the incredibly long list of foolish decisions she'd already made in recent weeks. What was one more?

Relief swamped her as she reached Paul's chambers through the maze of hallways, and heard his voice coming from the other side of the portal. Rapping softly upon the door, it was torn open almost violently before her face.

"Louisa, that better be you," Paul growled. "We need to leave here at once." He stopped short, surprise coloring his features. "Izzy? What the devil are you doing here? Get inside right away, it's not safe out there." He seemed agitated, his face very flushed, with irritation or impatience, she couldn't tell.

*Louisa*? Was he waiting for Ram's ex-mistress? For a moment her mind wandered. Had Ram gone to Louisa last night? Would he make her his mistress once more? The crushing pain returned again.

Paul's hand wrapped about her upper arm as he hauled her into his room. A very harried and disgruntled valet looked up at her entrance, then, muttering to himself, left the room through another

door, one she assumed to be the wardrobe, to lend them privacy.

"Why have you come here?"

"I must speak with you. 'Tis urgent."

"More urgent than a contagion that could kill us all, you little twit?"

He'd never spoken to her in such a manner before. Taken aback, she tried diplomacy.

"I came to assure myself you had left London for your own safety. Why haven't you departed yet? Where will you go?"

He sneered. "Back to Somerset, to rely on the goodwill and generosity of distant relatives, as I still have not a pot to piss in."

She flinched at the vulgarity of his words. "Before you leave, there's something you must know. About Ram."

"Ah. So your reasons for coming here are, after all, selfishly motivated."

For a moment, she faltered. What if Paul proposed marriage when she told him everything? She could say yes, leave with him, have someplace to belong. She still cared for him.

Nay. It would be the easiest thing to do, to use Paul like that, but easy didn't equal right. How would she let him down, after he'd tried so hard to help?

"Aye. Nay. Paul. Of course I'm concerned for you. But there's something else. You don't have to tell Ram's father what you know. I beg you not to. Ram wants to annul our marriage. There's no reason now to tell his father about Ram' secret."

His eyes narrowed as he studied her. "You must be so pleased."

She swallowed hard, past the lump in her throat that seemed to be a permanent feature. “To be honest, I’m not pleased. Not at all.”

Paul stared for a moment, his eyes roving over her from the top of her head to her feet, and then back again. “You’re in love with him.” It was a statement, not a question.

The last thing she wanted was to hurt Paul with the truth. “I cannot bear to see him hurt this way, not through his relationship with his father.”

“But you said he was going forward with the annulment. Why do you care?”

*Because I do love him.* “Because he’s a good man and he doesn’t deserve to have his family life torn to shreds because of me.”

Paul’s intense stare made her uncomfortable.

“Oh, Izzy, it was never about you and your precious annulment. I am destitute, don’t you realize that? The war destroyed all that my family once was. And the secret you shared with me is just what I need to regain some of what was lost fighting the royal cause, since Charles can’t or won’t replace it.”

She gasped, suddenly unable to draw enough air to fill her lungs. “You mean Ram was right? You didn’t do this for me? You really blackmailed him only for money?”

“For you?” He crowed with laughter. “The only use I’ve ever had for you, Izzy, is in my bed! Even if you were unmarried, your father had no dowry for you. It would have been pointless to consider marriage to you.”

She heard the words he spoke, but her mind rejected them. He

couldn't be speaking true! She'd waited so long for him to return and marry her. "You never planned to wed me? What about the promises you extracted, begging me to await your return?"

He snorted inelegantly. "I was asking you to wait to let me make you my mistress before some other man took the opportunity."

She gasped in shock. "You *never* desired to marry me?"

"I desired you in my bed, Izzy. Isn't that enough?"

"Enough? I loved you! Do you truly believe I would have been content to be nothing but your mistress?" She threw her hands in the air. "I've thrown my marriage away because of those promises and what I thought were my deep feelings for you, and yours for me."

"It's not my fault if you were too naïve to understand my meaning. I never told you we would wed, I never declared my intentions to your father or promised I would. You should have known."

"I was but eighteen years old! And you knew I believed you intended to marry me!"

He shrugged.

It was as if something physically snapped inside of her.

She launched herself at him, pummeling his chest with blows, sobbing harshly, hoping against hope a well aimed punch might make her feel...something. She wanted him to hurt as she was hurting, both for his cruel rejection and for his hand in the destruction of her marriage to Ram out of naught more than greed.

"Cease this!" Cursing, he grabbed her arms, pinning them to her side. "So I was correct? You are no longer in favor of an

annulment?"

When she didn't answer, he shook her roughly. "Answer me."

She blinked back tears. Izzy didn't know the man before her, not at all, and yet she'd wasted so much on him. "Nay. I'd do anything to stop it. But it's too late, thanks to you. Ram will not pay you the money you demanded and will instead face the wrath of his father. And, since he thinks I colluded with you in your blackmail, he cast me out."

"Ah, poor thwarted Izzy." He laughed. Of all the horrendous things he could do in the face of her grief, his laughter told her more than words exactly how he felt about her. He'd never even truly been her friend, though she'd poured her heart out to him as if he was, so many times. The tender feelings she'd held for him for so long began to wither, and bitterness consumed her. How could she have been such a fool not to see what everyone else had seen so clearly?

She tried to jerk away from his grip, but his fingers tightened around her arms. Panic began to rise. She didn't like the speculative way he suddenly eyed her, or the way his color heightened. "You might not be able to change his mind about an annulment, but you could change *my mind* about telling his father Royston's secrets." His voice turned husky.

Hope breathed to life in her chest like a barely lit ember, warring with suspicion. "How?"

"You pay me five thousand quid, and I'll forget everything I know about your husband's royalist sympathies.

*Five thousand pounds? Where on Earth will I get that kind of*

*money?*

The answer came immediately. She would return to Cornwall, collect the most valuable gowns and jewels she had left, and sell them. And she would think of a way to make up the difference. Somehow, she would raise the exorbitant sum he demanded.

"I have one more condition, my sweet." His hand slid down her arm, then up her side to cup the curve of her breast. It took every ounce of willpower not to shudder in revulsion. "You will share my bed, as you should have done years ago."

She recoiled from his outrageous demand and opened her mouth to voice a protest, but it died on her lips. There would be no talking him out of this. He felt *entitled* to her for some reason. Some instinct screamed that it had more to do with Ram then with her. First he had made a conquest of Ram's ex-mistress, now he wanted Ram's wife. Paul had pitted himself in a one-sided competition with her husband, one he could never hope to win, although she'd never tell him so. The man she'd thought she'd known for so many years didn't exist, and the man before her was unstable and surely a bit demented.

In the end, Paul's reasons for wanting her in his bed didn't matter. She'd told him about the wonderful thing Ram had done during the war and now, because of her, Ram's relationship with his father was in jeopardy. She had to meet Paul's demands because she had to undo the damage she caused, no matter the cost, or she'd never be able to live with herself. And who else would suffer, but she? Ram would never find out, and even if he did it couldn't hurt him anymore; their marriage was over, he despised her, and with good cause. He

certainly no longer cared about whom she did or did not go to bed with.

Even still, a chill crawled across her flesh as she nodded, feeling like she'd just made a pact with the Devil. She was trading her body for his silence. He would turn her into a whore in truth. The only thing she could do was try to put the reckoning off for as long as possible. "I agree to your terms, my lord. But not at court, not now. I need go to Cornwall to get you your funds, and there is a contagion here. My parents will not be in the country with me. Come to Cornwall in a fortnight and I'll have your money, and the other part of your bargain shall be met as well."

His eyes kindled. "I look most forward to it. But I fear I must insist upon a down payment before we part ways. A demonstration of your good faith, if you will."

"But I don't have any"-

Before she could stop him, he snatched one of the sapphires from her ear. "I'll take this to seal the first part of our agreement."

Izzy crushed the urge to protest. The earring had been a wedding gift from Ram and the only tangible thing she had from her time with him that held any true meaning, for he'd picked them for her before their wedding day himself, when he'd still been Julian to her. But what difference did it make? She'd have to sell the earrings and the necklace to raise Paul's money, anyway.

Without warning, he pulled her flush against him. "And this will serve to heighten your anticipation for the second part of our agreement."

He smashed his mouth over hers. She struggled to keep bile from rising in her throat as his moist tongue prodded against her lips, seeking entry. She had to do this, for Ram's sake. Gathering her control with a deep breath, she opened to him, accepting his tongue inside her mouth.

His hands grasped her backside, cupping her, pressing her against the erection evident through his breeches. The fingers of his right hand inched down to the full skirt of her gown and began lifting, until his hand could caress the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. Instead of the shivery, pleasurable sensation that enthralled her when Ram touched her, nausea assailed her.

His left hand gripped her wrist, which she'd kept firmly planted to her side, and dragged her hand to the bulge in his breeches, pressing her palm against him. She took the cue and stroked him through the fabric.

Beneath her skirt, his fingers moved swiftly. Summoning every ounce of willpower she possessed, she suppressed a shudder of revulsion as he stroked the dry flesh between her legs. Moaning against her mouth, his fingers prodded her most sensitive skin, then thrust inside her, rudely. Her lack of desire left her unready, and his invasion was uncomfortable and even painful.

She tried to keep her mind separated from what was happening to her body, but even still, shame overwhelmed her. She told Ram she'd be his whore, and she meant it. But when it came down to it, she wasn't trading her favors for anything, not really, because she loved him, and sharing herself with him was right. She'd given herself to

Ram with no strings attached, because he owned her, heart, body and soul.

But this- this was demeaning. Now she truly knew what it felt like to play the whore, to use her body for gain. If she did this thing, she'd forever be sullied by it. But she would do anything, *anything*, if it meant keeping Ram's secret. She was desperate to protect him. The urge to weep with despair over what she'd lost inundated her.

Paul panted against her mouth, his fingers moving faster inside of her, his erection straining against her hand through his breeches. She had to stop him or in another moment he'd have her bent over the bed and would take his pleasure of her, and she wasn't ready for that yet. She would share his bed as he demanded, but not before she spoke at length with Maura and learned what she must do to prevent quickening with his child.

Jerking her hand from his breeches, she pressed both palms against his chest, surprised at the heat radiating from him through his shirt. "Is that enough of a demonstration?" she bit out.

"I'll decide what's enough," he gritted.

His hands went to her back and she recoiled with horror. He was trying to undo her gown! "Nay!" She struggled frantically to pull away but he held her in an iron grip as he unfastened her gown.

"I would see the goods I'm buying. Be still!"

She went icy cold. He didn't only want her in his bed, he *intended* to demean her. Swallowing her fear, she renewed her effort to escape his grasp. She twisted and writhed against him, all to no avail. In desperation she raked her nails down his cheek, drawing blood.

He put a hand to the scratches, looked at the blood on his fingers, then stared at her incredulously. Surprise quickly faded and fury flared in his blue eyes. His right hand balled into a fist; before Izzy could duck away, he struck her. Light burst behind her eye and pain staggered her. He twisted his left hand in her hair and hit her again. When she would have fallen to her knees, his cruel grasp prevented it, and her scalp burned as he used her hair to hold her upright.

"You little bitch! Do you think behavior like that will earn your beloved husband a reprieve?"

Izzy whimpered, too overcome with pain to form a coherent answer. The entire right side of her face throbbed in agony, from temple to chin.

"I'm going to give you a small taste of what you'll experience in my bed, and when you come to me next time it had damn well be *willingly*. If you fight me again, our agreement is off."

Izzy didn't struggle when he slid her gown to her feet, leaving her clad only in her chemise. His hand tangled in her hair again and he dragged her to the bed, throwing her face down upon it.

She rose on her elbows, trying to roll over to talk him out of doing this now. "Paul, nay!"

He cursed and grabbed her left wrist, holding it in a painful grip. Something brushed her hand and she looked up, appalled, as he bound her wrist with a leather cord that was tied at the other end to the bed. He repeated the action with her right hand.

That he already had makeshift restraints tied to his bed

horrified her. That he'd tied other woman down in his bed the same way repulsed her.

She trembled in terror.

He laughed. "Fear not, Izzy. There will be no penetration today. I want you to go home to Cornwall and anticipate our next encounter every day, until we meet again."

His words didn't alleviate her fear. Relief wouldn't come until she was untied, fully dressed, and gone from his rooms. Tied to his bed, she'd never felt so vulnerable in her life.

"I don't suppose your husband has any fetishes does he? Anything he finds especially arousing?" Paul asked conversationally, as he went to a chest of drawers. "He strikes me as the utterly conventional type, who'd never explore all the varied deviant behaviors the world offers, to gratify himself."

Izzy remained silent, confused by the strange questions and commentary.

"But then again, we do share Louisa between us, and her appetite for the deviant is nigh insatiable. Perhaps your husband isn't as straight-laced as appearance leads one to believe."

The sharp ache in her heart at the thought of Ram and Louisa together should no longer surprise her, but it did.

When Paul reappeared at her side, he held a switch in his hand and thoughts of Ram and Louisa fled. Fear returned full force, stronger than before.

Breathing deeply, she sought to reassure herself. She'd suffered the switch before and survived with her pride intact. She would get

through this, too.

He ran his hand lightly down her back, then over her buttock and the back of one thigh. When he swept his hand back up he grasped her chemise, lifting it to her hips, exposing her to his gaze.

"Do you know what a fetish is, Izzy?"

With a whimper she shook her head.

He chuckled. "I didn't expect so. You've been a bride for such a short time." His fingers followed the cleft of her bare backside. "Some men find that unconventional activity in bed adds to their excitement and pleasure. For instance, some men find a woman's feet the most arousing part of her body, and love to be stimulated by her toes. That would be a foot fetish."

His fingers continued lower, stroking between her legs. "Spread yourself for me," he ordered.

Instead, she tensed against the unwelcome touch and squeezed her legs together, but he grasped each thigh in a cruel grip and spread her, then returned to his fondling. Izzy choked on a cry of despair.

"Some men enjoy dressing as a woman in the privacy of their bedchamber." His voice became husky. One finger encircled the opening of her body. "The more daring ones go out in public in female dress." His finger slipped inside her, only the smallest way.

"And then there are men like me. Inflicting pain arouses me almost to the point of madness."

Suddenly his fingers were gone and he brought the switch down hard across her backside and thighs. Izzy shrieked as fiery pain snaked through her, then gagged as agony snatched her breath.

“Scream all you like, *ma petite*. There’s none left to hear you. Even if there were, no one would dare interfere.”

The switch whistled through the air as he brought it down again. Izzy jerked against the restraints, biting her lip so hard she tasted blood.

This was nothing like the blows of the switch Mrs. Smith had dealt her so long ago, to force her acquiescence to marriage. Paul put the full force of his strength into each brutal lash. Izzy choked on tears, panting harshly against the searing pain.

Something tickled the back of her legs. She went still. Paul was trailing the handle of the switch against her skin with a light touch. Higher and higher he went, until the tip of the handle slid against the flesh between her legs. Terror gripped her so tightly she could barely breathe. Her heart pounded in her chest at the thought that he might strike her there. She moaned.

“Ah, Izzy,” his voice was thick and guttural. “Your skin is so perfect, so smooth. I will find the greatest pleasure in marring it.”

The switch lashed her once more. Izzy cried out; the chamber spun before her eyes. She felt moisture on her lower back. He’d drawn blood.

A blunt object probed between her legs. For one numb instant she thought he’d removed his breeches and was about to mount her. A part of her was relieved, for if he spent himself, this torment would end.

Except the bluntness wasn’t smooth and she stiffened with horrified realization. He was probing her with the leather-covered

handle of the switch. She moaned, clamping her legs together. If he thrust that inside her, the roughness of the leather would likely damage her skin. The pressure on the handle increased, but though it abraded her inner thighs and sensitive outer flesh, she kept her legs together so tightly it went no further.

When he tried to spread her legs, she fought him with a burst of desperate energy. He deliberately pressed his fingers into an open welt on her lower back. Sharp, blinding pain radiated from the spot; she writhed in agony, barely clinging to consciousness. While she was diverted, he jammed his knee between her legs and forced them wide apart. The handle returned. He pressed it between her folds, but went no further. She changed her mind, praying she'd lose consciousness, praying for oblivion before he thrust that hard object inside her. The room darkened and she grew dizzy.

Izzy was jerked out of her fog, back into the moment, when the switch fell once more. The coverlet muffled her weak cry.

She choked on sobs, even as tears tracked down her cheek. An eerie silence fell in the chamber and when Paul next spoke she jumped with terror. His mouth was near her ear.

"I believe that's enough for now. I'd entertain you further, but it's time to leave this stinking hell-hole. You've had a demonstration and now you know what you have to look forward to." He tangled his hand in her hair, jerking her head up. His face was taut with frustrated desire. "And you'll come to me willingly, won't you."

Izzy managed to nod, unwilling to believe this ordeal was finished until he untied her wrists.

He did.

It was truly over. For now.

She lay still, consumed by pain, trying to gather the strength to rise.

Paul tossed her gown at her. “Get dressed and get out.”

She sat slowly, stiffly, swallowing a whimper as her raw flesh came into contact with the mattress. She forced herself to her feet and smoothed her chemise into place, despite the wild spinning of the chamber. Getting into her gown took several tries, but Paul didn’t offer his aid. Fighting waves of excruciating pain and gut-clenching nausea, she managed to loosely fasten her gown so it wouldn’t slip off her shoulders.

Paul motioned negligently to the door. “Farewell, Izzy. I’ll call on you, soon.” He turned his back, dismissing her. Izzy opened the door and crossed the threshold, then, when she pulled the door closed, leaned against it. Her entire body began to tremble; in pain, in shock, in fear. She sucked in a breath for fortification and made her way slowly to the exit, clinging to the wall. It was a painstaking ordeal. Thank God no one was about to see her this way.

When the carriage came into sight she froze, slumping with relief at the sight of the servant who’d served her family for so long, knowing she’d be safe with him, but unable to move from the wall. Laurence spotted her and jumped down from the driver’s seat and sprinted toward her. As he approached his face twisted with horror. “My lady! What happened to ye?”

She blinked away hot tears. “I-I can’t speak of it,” she

whispered. She took a step toward him, then swayed.

He lifted her into his arms. “Easy, My lady.” He carried her swiftly to the carriage and placed her gently inside. She slumped heavily upon the squabs.

“I’ll have ye home before ye know it.”

“Nay!” she struggled upright. “Portsmouth. You must take me to Portsmouth!”

“But, my lady! You need to be tended.”

“I’ll be fine, Laurence. I’ll rest on the journey. Don’t worry for me.” When he continued to stand at the door looking uncertain, she forced more authority into her voice. “Portsmouth, Laurence, and quickly! You must return for Belinda later, so we cannot delay now.”

His mouth tightened with displeasure, but he was too well trained to gainsay her order, With a resigned shake of his head and a mutinous glare of disapproval, he closed the carriage door. The vehicle rocked as he climbed into the box, and within moments the horses trotted off.

Izzy wept.

# Chapter 29

Belinda tried to contain her panic. For once in her life, she was uncertain as to what she should do. When she woke more than two hours before, her senses warned her Izzy had flown. The sheets beside her in the bed were long cold, and her cousin's valise was nowhere in sight.

Speaking with Thomas had confirmed her worst fears. Izzy had left at the break of dawn, her destination unknown.

Surely Izzy wouldn't still consider going to court? Not after the promise she'd made the night before?

Belinda didn't know what to think. Izzy was grieving, and she may very well have changed her mind. And as Izzy had taken the carriage that had returned in the night, Belinda lacked transportation to go looking for her errant cousin. Likely that was by design. But Belinda was too worried to be angry with Izzy.

How long should she wait for Izzy to return?

Izzy had left a terse note. She would send the coach back within a matter of hours so Belinda could leave for Eric's home in the afternoon. Did that mean Izzy wasn't going to join her parents in the north? If she had no plans to do so, where then would she go? Or did she mean to go to Eric's after all?

Another quarter of an hour ticked by and Belinda's nerves were strung taut. She had to act, and she couldn't wait for Izzy to send the carriage back. It was imperative she find Ram, if he were still in town.

Waiting was no longer an option. Jumping to her feet, she rang for a servant and ordered the footman to hire a hack. He looked at her askance, but did her bidding without question.

Belinda rushed upstairs to her chamber to dress. Meg bustled in on Belinda's heels, wringing her hands, obviously also worried on behalf of her mistress.

"Are ye going to find her?"

"I'm certainly going to try, Meg."

Meg gave a hacking cough and Belinda looked at her askance. "Are you ill?"

The maid shrugged off the concern. "Just a bit of a cold, I'm fine. I come from hearty stock," she grinned and Belinda forced herself to relax; a cough did *not* mean smallpox now run amok in their home. Meg hadn't been anywhere near White Hall.

Fifteen minutes later Belinda was as coiffed as if she were spending the evening at a play. Satisfied with the results, she thanked Meg profusely, then ordered the girl to bed to rest.

She sprinted downstairs to meet the hack. It was time to beard the lion in his den.

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The hackney pulled up in front of Ram's town home, and with a jolt of both surprise and undeniable pleasure she recognized the de Vere Coach waiting on the street. Breathing a sigh of relief she paid her driver and dismissed him, knowing if she needed to travel anywhere else that day, she could rely on Lucien.

When had he ceased to be Lord Lucien?

Better to consider that question at another time.

She knocked upon the front door and counted to ten, surprised when the butler didn't immediately appear to bid her entry. She chewed her lip in indecision, then knocked again, harder.

Why was there none to answer the door? Where was the staff?

It was beyond the pale to let oneself into someone else's house, but that's exactly what she decided to do. She reached for the door handle, relieved to find it unlocked. She nudged the door open a crack. "Lord Royston?" Her voice echoed back, but there was no answering reply.

The sound of male voices, raised in anger, reached her, coming from the study. A shiver went through her when she heard the deep baritone of Lucien's voice. He and Ramsay were in the throes of a very heated discussion.

As she crept toward the door, the words floating out of the study began to make sense.

"Would you leave be with this, Lucien? I told you, I'm done with Isabelle Beaumont. She is welcome to her precious Paul. I hope they'll be ecstatic with one another."

Lucien snorted. "You wish no such thing." There was a pause, perhaps as Lucien took a drink.

"You're right, Lucien. I'm not that selfless of a man. I want her to be ecstatic, at first, because she's finally gotten everything she's ever wanted. And then it will bring me the greatest of pleasure as that happiness is stripped away slowly, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, until Huntley is revealed to her for the bastard he truly is and

she realizes she's thrown away every chance at true happiness she had and that she's gotten exactly what she deserves."

Belinda flinched and her heart sank. Could he really mean that? Ram was her best and only chance of finding Izzy before a disaster befell her. But it sounded as if her journey had been for naught, for he wasn't feeling charitable towards Izzy at the moment.

"You don't wish that on her either, Ramsay. That's your anger and the drink talking."

Ram didn't deny it.

Belinda squared her shoulders. Ram had every right to be angry with Izzy, but she was still his wife, and Belinda refused to leave this place without his aid.

"I'm telling you, Ram, she loves you," Lucien insisted with dogged persistence. Belinda silently cheered him on.

"Nay, Lucien. Izzy needs me. That's vastly different from loving me. Huntley doesn't want her and her father won't allow her back. She has nowhere else to go. That, my friend, does not love make."

"Let's say for the sake of conversation that was true. You would leave her with nowhere to go? You would see her cast into the streets?"

"She's no longer my responsibility," Ram insisted.

Lucien made a frustrated sound. "You didn't see her yesterday, after you stormed out of here. She was devastated, Ram."

"I care not for what pretty words she used to lure you to her side. She's a master at deception."

Belinda's heart lurched. The pain in Ram's voice was raw. This

was a private matter that Izzy and Ram needed to sort for themselves. But she didn't know where else to turn for aid, if not from Izzy's husband. Belinda boldly entered the study, and both men froze.

"The Baron did not refuse Izzy a place, my lord, if that's what you think." Ram flushed, knowing she'd overheard him. "My uncle left a note for Izzy yesterday, before he departed with my aunt, asking both of us to join them when the carriage returned for us."

"Belinda." Lucien stepped forward and clasped her hands, oblivious to Ram' wide-eyed stare at the action and the familiar use of her given name. "What's brought you here so early? Is something amiss? If your uncle sent the carriage back, why aren't the two of you already on your way somewhere safe?"

Lucien's voice dropped, and that intimacy, combined with the large hands that held hers so warmly, discomfited her, almost made her reason for venturing out forgotten. She forced her attention from Ram and turned to Lucien.

"You are distraught," He added with a stroke on her cheek. "Tell me what's amiss."

Regaining her composure, Belinda whirled on Ram, in time to see the quirking of his brow as he stared at her and Lucien.

She addressed her answer to her cousin's husband. "Aye, there is something terribly wrong, *my lord.*"

Ram leaned against his desk regarding her with a lazy gaze. "You asked the wrong question, Lucien. The proper question would be- what catastrophic mess has your little bitch of a cousin gotten herself into this time that would worry you enough to bring you

rushing over here at such an ungodly hour?"

Belinda gasped.

"Ram!" Lucien snapped.

Ram flushed. "I apologize, Miss Spencer. That was uncalled for. And I'm truly sorry for your sake if your cousin has once more selfishly embroiled you in her schemes. But Isabelle's concerns are no longer mine."

"She took the carriage early this morning and left!" Belinda cried, frustrated by his lack of interest. Had she been wrong about his feelings for Izzy after all?

He shrugged. "So?"

"She took it to court, Ramsay. *To court.*"

Something sparked in his grey eyes. "Why in the bloody blazes did she go there? The place is crawling with illness."

"It doesn't matter why! You're her husband. You must find her and bring her home before it's too late."

Ram's eyes narrowed. "Why did she go to Court, Belinda?"

Obviously he wouldn't even discuss going after Izzy unless Belinda answered the question she'd hoped to avoid. She met and held his gaze. "She went to find Paul."

An emotion flitted across his face so fast she almost missed it. But it was grief, pure and simple. "Then I hope for her sake he's smart enough to take her out of there" Ram stared back, his voice returned to normal, his face a study of indifference.

Belinda balled her fists, resisting the urge to pop him in the nose, to knock some sense into him. She was acutely aware Lucien had

stepped very close behind her, perhaps to lend her moral support.

"You don't understand. She went for *you*, Ram! I couldn't stop her! She went to beg Paul not to go to your father."

Ram's eyes widened. "What? Why would she do that?"

"Because she loves you! She accepts that your marriage is over, but she truly believes Paul will leave off with his threat if she asks him. She's so afraid of being the cause of a rift between you and your father that she wouldn't even consider the risks to herself." Belinda took a deep, steadying breath. "I begged her not to go but she wouldn't listen. She was adamant she do this one last thing for you."

"The place is teeming with smallpox. Who knows how many have been infected. Was Izzy exposed to the illness as a child?"

Belinda shook her head.

Ram's face lost all color. "My God. How long ago did she leave?"

"She was up by dawn. I'm not sure when she departed for court and I have no idea where she'll go when she's done there. We were supposed to join her parents at Eric's estate in the north, but she has yet to send the carriage back for me, so I don't know." Belinda felt the sting of tears behind her eyes and fought to keep control of herself. "I'm so worried," she whispered.

Before her eyes, Ram underwent a transformation. Gone was the lazy indifference. In its place she saw only steady determination.

He clasped her hands in his. "I'll stop her if she hasn't yet made it to court. I'll drag her home kicking and screaming, need be, if she's there" As he turned away he muttered something that sounded

suspiciously like “and then I’ll tan her arse.”

The moment he disappeared through the door Belinda sighed with relief. Then, utterly exhausted, she collapsed onto a sofa and shut her eyes.

She became aware of Lucien the instant he sat beside her. She’d almost forgotten his presence in her haste and worry. Her eyes snapped open when he lifted her foot into his lap and slid off her shoe. She started to protest, but the words died on her lips as he kneaded the sole of her foot through her stocking. She was so weary and worried, and it felt like heaven. Her head dropped back against the cushion and a tiny moan escaped her lips.

“Belinda, if Izzy took the coach, how did you get here?”

“Hmm?” Without lifting her head, she answered. “I hired a hack.”

“Alone?” The hands on her feet stilled. She wiggled her toes against his fingers, letting him know she wanted more.

“You’ll never do such a thing again, do you hear me? If you need transportation, you’ll send a servant to my house and I will dispatch a carriage for you. Do you understand?”

Finally, she lifted her head and looked into his brooding, angry eyes. Why was he so upset? But his concern touched her, made her want to giggle with happiness for reasons she didn’t understand, or more aptly, didn’t want to contemplate. “If you continue rubbing my feet, I’ll acquiesce to anything you desire,” she flung back coquettishly instead, astounding herself with her forwardness.

He started, but then a bark of laughter escaped his lips. “You

know not what you agree to."

"Hmm." She repeated, wiggling her feet again. "I'm willing to take the risk."

They sat in quiet for a few moments, the only sound in the room her soft sighs as he worked the soles of her feet.

And then;

"Do you think he'll find her?" she chewed her lip, worrying about Izzy all over again.

Lucien's touch grew gentle. "I don't know. But Ram is tenacious. If anyone can find her, it will be he. My coach will take you home and I'll send word to you as soon as I hear anything at all."

Belinda shook her head. "I appreciate your offer, I truly do, but I intend to stay here. I want to be here in case Izzy comes home."

He sent an odd look skittering in her direction, but nodded. She removed her feet from his lap and sat up straight on the sofa, determined to wait for whatever news Ram might return with. But soon her exhaustion of the previous days began to catch up with her.

"Belinda?"

"Hmm?" she responded drowsily.

"At least let me have Dexter make up a chamber for you." he reached out and snatched a lock of her hair, rubbing it between his fingertips. "You are exhausted with worry."

"Nay. I should prefer to wait here for Ram. I'm well enough." His touch on her hair sent tingles down her spine.

"You don't have to be strong all of the time, you know. I'm here, and I can be strong for you."

His kind words almost brought her to tears. Two days of worry and fear for Izzy's health were taking their toll. She was emotionally and physically fatigued.

She sank back against the settee, let her eyelids flutter closed. She would rest for but a few minutes.

Slowly, Lucien wrapped an arm about her shoulder. Belinda remained sitting stiffly upright, so aware of how inappropriate it was to let him touch her this way, to be with him like this. But any voice of reason that might convince her otherwise was drowned out by a wave of exhaustion and slowly she relaxed into him, until her head lay against his chest. The warmth of his embrace soon lulled her to sleep and she gave into it, knowing she was safe in Lucien's strong arms.

# Chapter 30

*What the hell was Izzy thinking?* The question repeated in Ram's mind like a mantra, tormenting him, over and over again, along with, *does it mean anything that she was risking her health for his sake?* She was misguided, it was true, for he could fight his own battles and Huntley wasn't a threat he took seriously, but Izzy couldn't know that. In his fury, he'd never bothered to tell her he had information of his own with which to neutralize Huntley. Perversely, Ram had wanted to see how far she would go with her threats, and so he'd kept his silence.

For very much the same reason, he'd never told her Huntley had sold out to Cromwell. During the years he'd been gone Huntley had gathered information on various Royalists, beginning with Izzy's own family, and sold it to Cromwell's spy network, over and over again. If he'd told her the truth, that Huntley endangered her brothers' lives time and again for profit, that her feelings for the man would die. But Ram hadn't wanted that to be the reason she turned away from Huntley.

Now she might pay the ultimate price for his stubborn pride.

He clung to the hope Izzy had lied. She was a master manipulator. How many times had she said she would do one thing, so everyone would look the other way while she did something else?

And then there was the chance Belinda was mistaken. Perhaps Izzy only wanted to be sure her precious Paul safely escaped the

stricken court.

Either way, whatever the reason, if Izzy truly meant to go to court, he would stop her if it wasn't too late.

His heart constricted at the thought of her ill with smallpox. It was a horrid disease. Nearly a third of all people who contracted it died, and most who survived were hideously scarred for life. He knew, for he'd seen the disease in action when he was barely more than a toddler. Both he and his cousin had been stricken. Only Ram survived. The thought of his beautiful, vivacious Izzy taken out of his world in that way was a thought too horrendous to bear.

*What was she thinking?*

Once he found her, and knew she would be all right, he would kiss her soundly and then wring her lovely neck.

His carriage careened through the Holbein gate and Ram flew from the interior before hid driver, Guy, had even brought the coach to a complete stop. As it was, too much time had already been wasted on the journey. Ram should have dispensed with the coach and taken Mercury instead. The crush of carriages on the streets of London moving away from court had cost precious time.

Ram strode through the entrance, disregarding the warning cry of a steward who appeared on his left. His feet unerringly trod through the maze of hallways until he stood outside the door to Huntley's rooms. When Ram was last here with Izzy he'd made it a point of knowing exactly where his competition was lodged and now that foresight proved useful.

He needed to assure himself that Paul was long gone, and that

Izzy had no reason to be here.

His heart dropped in dread when he heard voices coming from the partially open door. One was male and one most definitely belonged to a female.

"Izzy!" he cried, shouldering the door open without giving any warning to the inhabitants.

Huntley sat on a bed, his face flushed. He was very obviously furious, but his anger was directed at the other occupant in the room. Ram's gaze quickly swept the room and focused in on the lone female, standing across the room near the hearth, twisting her hands together in dismay. About to dismiss her out of hand when he saw that her hair was not the chestnut brown of Izzy's tresses, but rather a buttery gold, his gaze slammed back to her face.

"Louisa?"

Her eyes widened, her tongue darted out to moisten her lips. "Ram? What are you doing here?"

He narrowed his eyes. How long had she been warming Huntley's bed? It would be too ironic if she'd done so while still his mistress.

Ram turned his attention away from Louisa. He didn't care in whose bed she spent her nights. He was interested in one woman only.

"Yes, Royston. What *are* you doing here?" Huntley stood from the bed, looking weary and furious at the same time. His eyes were bloodshot, his face was pale, his lips pinched tight in an expression of anger. Fingernail gouges ran down his cheek. Against the pallor of his skin they stood out in stark relief, blood red and quite deep. Ram

couldn't help looking past him to the rumpled bed just vacated. He noticed the cords tied to the headboard and shook his head in disgust, glancing at Louisa again. He hadn't the slightest doubt that she enjoyed being tied to Huntley's bed, playing his perverse games. When Ram first met her, he'd been jaded and bored with everything in life, and her antics in bed amused him well enough. Since that fateful day in the woods when he met a beautiful maiden who stole his heart, he'd discovered that despite Izzy's innocence—or perhaps because of it—that with love came the greatest excitement he'd ever experienced during lovemaking. In a way, he'd been as innocent as she, for he'd never truly made love to a woman before, until Izzy came into his life. No amount of bed toys or role-playing could ever bring the kind of pleasure that making love to the woman he loved did.

Was he willing to give her up without a fight, to never know that pleasure again, to return to romps in bed with a faceless parade of women like Louisa?

He didn't even have to think it over. Nay, he wasn't willing to lose what he'd found with Izzy if there was even the smallest chance to keep it. He'd been a fool to give up so quickly.

Having reached that decision in his own mind, he became even more anxious and determined to find Izzy and bring her home.

"I'm looking for my wife. Was she here today?"

"Aye, she was here earlier."

"How long did she stay?" Ram gritted out, determined not to jump to conclusions.

"Do you mean at court, or in my bed?"

Ram couldn't stomach the smugness on the man's face. He lunged forward, jamming his arm across Huntley's windpipe with such force it lifted him from his feet and against the wall, where Ram kept him pinned. "I'm in no mood for games, Huntley. Why was she here, when did she leave, and where did she go?"

Huntley grimaced. "For a man seeking an annulment from his estranged wife, you seem strangely concerned for her well-being."

Ram gritted his teeth, pressing harder against his nemesis' throat. "Answers, Huntley. I shall have them now. Or you'll not leave here."

Huntley snorted. "You wouldn't put yourself at such risk."

"Wouldn't I?" Ram challenged. "I've been exposed to smallpox. There's nothing for me to fear here."

Paul's eyes widened as he recognized this was no idle threat and nodded curtly, signaling his acquiescence. He pushed away from the wall and Ram released his hold.

Holding a hand to his throat, Huntley coughed and choked for a few moments. "She was here, but hours ago. I've no idea where her destination lay from here."

"*Why* did she come here?"

Huntley laughed. "She came to buy me off."

Ram drew his brows together. "Explain yourself."

"She wanted me to swear I'd never betray your secret. She was willing to pay *any* price to secure my silence."

Ram reeled. She *had* come here for his sake alone. *Oh, Izzy. You wonderful, endearing, little fool.* Then he focused on Huntley's full

intimation.

“What price? What did you demand of her?”

“Coin of course.” Huntley shrugged negligently as if extortion was a regular event in his daily life. “Five thousand quid.”

Ram started. “Where would she get those kinds of funds?”

Huntley shrugged again, but his eyes flicked to the table near the bed. Ram followed his gaze. Izzy’s sapphire and diamond earring lay sparkling upon the wood. Ram’s stomach twisted at the proof that she had indeed been there. Huntley lunged for the earring, but Ram was quicker, and scooped it into his hand.

“I’ll be taking this back.”

Huntley’s fist clenched at his side, but it relaxed as a malicious glint appeared in his ice blue eyes. “She paid an advance on my other demand as well.”

Ram stiffened. “Which was?”

“That she come willingly to my bed.”

A furious mist clouded Ram’s vision and it took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to pummel the man in front of him to death. “What kind of advance?” he demanded tersely.

“Ah.” Paul’s mouth twisted into a savagely satisfied smile. “That’s between your wife and I. I’m a gentleman, Royston. I never kiss and tell. If Izzy wants you to know she’ll have to tell you.”

Ram was about to break the man’s neck when Louisa stepped forward.

“Paul!” she finally cried, her voice filled with shock, betrayal, and outrage.

“Shut up, you cow. If it weren’t for you, we’d be long gone from this hellhole. I never should have waited on you in the first place. I should have left you here to rot by yourself.”

“Is that the way you speak to a woman, Huntley?” Ram’s heart bled a little, for he had a feeling Izzy had been treated to a similar display by the desperate man, and if so she’d have been devastated. “You better have shown my wife more respect than you’ve just shown your mistress.”

“I would never treat Izzy in any manner other than the way she deserves.” He shrugged. “As for *my mistress*, she is but a whore, Maitland. One of your many cast-offs. Just as Izzy will soon be.”

“You’ll be dead before you have an opportunity to lay another hand on my *wife*!”

Huntley smirked. “Are you challenging me to pistols at dawn?”

Ram let his gaze slide insolently over Paul’s features, down to his shoes and back to his face and then delivered his coup de grace. “It’s pointless for you to leave White Hall, Huntley. You’re burning with fever, I can feel the heat emanating from you. You know as well as I do you’ve been infected with smallpox. I doubt very much you’ll be alive to meet me at any dawn.”

Ram started for the door, feeling no remorse at the choking sound of despair he heard coming from the man Izzy once loved. It was the sound of a man who’d had his worst fear confirmed.

Before he stepped through the threshold, Ram glanced at his former mistress. “Louisa, there is a pock upon your cheek,” he said quietly. Then he strode through the door, hearing her pitiful scream in

his mind long after he'd departed White Hall.

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Four hours later, Ram returned to the house, exhausted and crazed with worry. He'd gone to Eric's home north of London, but Izzy hadn't made an appearance there. All he'd managed to do was alarm her parents. Sick with dread after seeing that Huntley was infected with smallpox, Ram didn't know what to do next.

Noting Lucien's carriage still stood in the street, Ram let himself into the house, where he wearily made his way to the study to brood and plan. *Where is she?*

As he crossed the threshold, his friend stood abruptly from the sofa, and for a moment Ram feared he'd interrupted his friend and cousin-by-marriage in a compromising situation. But Lucien put his fingers over his lips and Ram saw Belinda was asleep upon the settee. Lucien raised a questioning eyebrow and Ram shook his head in reply, then slumped into his desk chair, laying his head in his hands.

His fear for Izzy was like nothing he'd ever experienced in his life. No one knew where she was, and she could be sick and alone, afraid. What if she needed him? He couldn't bear the thought.

Nay. He'd not allow himself to think of her ill with smallpox. She couldn't die now, not when couldn't bear to live without her. He would never annul their marriage. He loved her too much. He needed her too much. His life would have no meaning without her in it. In their short time together she'd become the most important thing in his world.

And the risk she'd taken today proved she loved him, too.

Mayhap not the same way he loved her, but it was enough for a new beginning.

He was too worn out to do more than sit there, holding his head in his hands, casting his thoughts about for any idea, no matter how far-fetched, that would yield a clue as to where Izzy had gone.

"Did you find her?" Belinda's voice, groggy from sleep, rang with hope.

Ram swallowed, wishing he had better news to impart. "Nay. She did go to court and she saw Huntley, but she was gone by the time I got there and if Huntley knows her destination, he wouldn't say."

Ram knew he couldn't keep what he'd learned to himself. "Huntley is ill. As is Louisa. I fear for Izzy's health."

The room fell into silence.

"Cornwall."

Lucien and Ram looked at Belinda. "Why would she go to Cornwall?" Lucien asked, but even before the question was out of his mouth, Ram launched himself from the chair.

"Of course. She told me to send word of our annulment to Cornwall. Why didn't I think of that before?"

"Because she told me she'd go straight to Eric."

Ram grimaced. "I fell for that trick once. Falling for it a second time makes me an utter fool. How would she have chosen to journey home?"

Belinda wrinkled her brow in thought. "She wouldn't have taken the carriage all the way to Cornwall, as she promised to have it

sent back to me, post haste. If she took it to Cornwall it would be days ere it was returned." She shook her head, as though coming to a swift conclusion. "She either went by ship or she took a mount."

Lucien stalked from the study. "I'll check with a stable hand."

A sound of surprise echoed from the foyer, and Ram and Belinda rushed out of the study. Lucien had opened the front door and the Beaumont carriage was sitting in the street. When the driver climbed down from his perch and raised his hand in greeting without opening either door, it was apparent Izzy wasn't inside.

Ram pushed ahead of his friend and cornered the poor driver, interrogating him on the spot. "Where did you take my wife?"

The harried man doffed his cap quickly, clearly uncomfortable to be confronted so. "I took her to Portsmouth, as she directed, sir. She's me mistress, I couldn't say her nay. When I returned to the Beaumont residence a servant sent me here, told me Miss Belinda had need of the carriage."

Ram fought to grasp hold of his churning emotions. At least he knew *where* she'd gone for a certainty, now. Knowing put his mind at rest a tiny bit.

"Of course you couldn't refuse her, Laurence. You did nothing wrong." Belinda said quickly, trying to put the driver at ease. "You know how stubborn she can be," she added with a reassuring smile.

The grim look remained on the driver's face and Ram grew alarmed. "Was she well when you left her?" he demanded.

Laurence shifted uncomfortably, looking quickly at Belinda and then back. Lucien immediately took her arm and drew her away

despite her protest.

"Nay, milord. She was in a real bad way."

Ram's fear returned full force, snatching his breath. "Was she ill?"

"Nay." The driver's face tautened with anger and his eyes flashed. "Someone beat her, Milord. When she came out of the palace she couldn't hardly walk. I had to carry her meself to the carriage."

"What!" Rage flooded Ram so fast it rocked him on his feet. Behind him he heard Belinda's horrified gasp. Ram's mind flit about in every direction, looking for an explanation until the obvious occurred to him.

Huntley.

Ram was torn between needing to go to Izzy and the desire to return to White Hall and slit Huntley's throat. Izzy's need won out, as it always would, but if Huntley survived his bout of Smallpox, he wouldn't live long enough to celebrate.

He looked the driver in the eye. "Are the horses up for the ride to take Miss Spencer to Eric Beaumont's house?"

He hadn't realized Belinda had stepped beside him. This time her gasp was almost directly in his ear.

"I will not abandon Izzy now, my lord. I'll send word to Izzy's parents about the circumstances, but I intend to be in Cornwall with as little delay as possible."

"Belinda, Izzy might be very ill. And you could become ill as well."

"Think you that would prevent me from caring for her?"

Ram met Lucien's gaze over Belinda's dark blond hair, and a look of understanding passed between them. Lucien would keep Belinda away as long as possible.

"I'm riding out by horse. You can't keep up. If you are determined to come to Cornwall, I ask that you allow Lucien to accompany you in his carriage."

She spun around to face the man who stood mere feet from her. Now that Ram thought about it, Lucien hadn't let Belinda out of his sight throughout the day. Not that now was the time to question Lucien's intentions. Now Ram needed his friend's help to keep Belinda out of the way.

"Think of your reputation, Miss Spencer. We'd be alone in the carriage together for two days."

"To the devil with my reputation, Lord Lucien. My cousin needs me." She took a deep breath. "I'll bring Meg."

He nodded tersely. "I'll escort you, then."

"I'll discover how dire the circumstances are and I'll send a messenger to meet you on the road. Promise me you'll go to Chesworth House until you hear from me that it's safe to come to Rendstell Manor?"

Belinda nodded. She wasn't happy with the plan, but neither he nor Lucien would allow her access to Izzy if she were truly ill. Smallpox was a wretched disease, and not for the faint of heart.

A stable hand brought out a prancing Mercury, and Ram leaped upon him, eager to be on his way. .

"God speed, Ramsay." Lucien said quietly.

Ram nodded in Lucien's direction, then whirled Mercury toward the road, and headed for Cornwall as though the hounds of hell were nipping at his feet.

# Chapter 31

It was so hot in the carriage. On the long trip by water from Portsmouth to Fowey, Izzy spent most of it in the tiny cabin she'd paid for, lying stiffly on her side in the thin berth, wracked with pain. When it became too much to bear she'd gone up to the deck where there was room to stand, grasping the railing of the ferry for support, ignoring the stares of the other passengers. She'd not been able to glimpse her face since leaving the palace, but if the pain was any indication she must look a fright. But at no point during the journey had she become physically ill.

As soon as she'd settled in the carriage hired to take her to Padstow, the heat suffocated her.

*Was this Smallpox?*

Nay, it wasn't possible. A full day hadn't even passed since she'd gone to White Hall. It was far too early to show symptoms the illness. Wasn't it?

So why then was she so bloody hot?

She loosened her clothing as much as was decent, but still she burned.

With trembling fingers, she carefully felt her face for the telltale signs of forming pustules. There were none.

It seemed to take forever to reach Padstow. Finally, exhausted beyond measure and wracked with pain from the bumpy journey, she accepted the driver's help to alight. Squaring her shoulders, she went

in search of transportation for the final leg of her journey. Night was falling by the time she found a driver willing to take her so far. She couldn't blame him- she probably looked more like a beggar than a noblewoman in her dirty and askew clothing, with her hair hanging in utter disarray, her face swollen and likely bruised.

If the carriage from Fowey had been stifling, the hackney to Padstow was freezing, even in the balmy warmth of the late summer night. Shivers wracked her and an ache suffused her entire body that had nothing to do with the pain inflicted at Paul's hands. Her head pounded fiercely while her stomach spasmed with nausea.

There was no more pretending all was fine. She was ill. The interior of the carriage spun before her eyes. She held onto consciousness by a tenuous thread. She wouldn't make it to her parent's home before she passed out.

Knocking weakly on the ceiling of the carriage, she waited for the driver to dismount. "Aye, miss?" he cast her a dubious look.

"I've changed my destination. Please take me to Chesworth House."

It was closer than Rendstell Manor. She grew more ill with each turn of the wheels, so it made more sense to stop at Ram's home. She prayed the Earl and Ram's sister weren't in residence, for she didn't wish to risk exposing anyone to her contagion. She would insist on being quarantined from the household and staff and she'd have to do for herself.

"As it pleases ye, mum." He peered closely at her. "Are ye well?"

“I’m fine, only tired from the long journey.”

The look on his face told her he didn’t believe her in the least.

When the driver returned to his seat atop the hack and the horses started moving again, she eased onto her side on the cushion with a wince and wrapped her skirts around her as tightly as possible, shivering like a newly born kitten.

It was the longest journey of her life.

When the driver assisted her from the carriage and up the steps of Chesworth House, she’d never been happier to see anyone more than she was to see Hawthorne. His eyes widened with surprise that quickly turned to horror.

“Lady Royston! What happened? Were you set upon on the road?”

At least the hours of travel had afforded her time to prepare a story. “Nay, Hawthorne. I fell and hit my face on a desk. Aside from that I’m afraid I’m under the weather.” She sidestepped his attempt to take her arm to lend assistance. “Would you kindly pay my driver? I shall only stay the evening and then I’ll journey on to my father’s manor, if that’s acceptable to you.”

“Of course it is, Lady Royston! This is your home!”

She winced. So, Ram hadn’t sent word of their separation to his country staff yet. “Is the Earl in residence?”

“Nay, my lady. He’s in Bodmin.”

“And Lady Juliana?”

“She’s visiting a friend for a fortnight.”

Izzy sighed with relief.

“I’ll send a maid to assist you in any way you need, my lady. You look…exhausted.”

“Nay, Hawthorne!” her sharp tone took the man aback. “I don’t want anyone exposed to whatever ailment I suffer from. If you’ll have a maid bring up a tray, some water, and some extra blankets, while I wait here, I shall care for myself for the evening.”

He seemed inclined to argue, but capitulated with a tight nod when she made it clear she wouldn’t accept any other arrangement.

Within moments, Hawthorne’s orders had been repeated down the chain of command. She sat in the foyer for a few minutes, wanting all of the staff well out of the way before she went to her chamber.

She watched Hawthorne pay the driver, trying to keep her chattering teeth from giving away how seriously ill she truly was.

She’d have to send word to her parents or Belinda in the morning. Surely Papa wouldn’t make her leave while she was ill. They’d have to find her a nurse who’d been exposed to Smallpox, who could see to her needs. Until then, she need only take care of herself for this one evening.

She resisted the urge to weep. The task ahead seemed colossal.

When Hawthorne informed her that the chamber was ready, she went to the stairs, put her hand on the banister, and looked up at the long flight of stairs in dismay. The first time she climbed these stairs was a harrowing journey. This was far worse. By the time she reached the bedchamber door, she had to cling to the doorknob to remain upright. The chamber was as she’d asked it to be prepared, and left intact much the same way as when she’d seen it last.

Memories crowded her, but she forced them away.

It was so cold despite the fire burning cheerfully in the hearth. She didn't want to remove her clothing, but it would be warmer under the blankets. The maid would have put a warming brick in the bed for her comfort.

It took the last of the energy she possessed to peel the soiled gown from her sweat soaked body and slide into bed wearing her chemise. Cold then hot, hot then cold. She shivered so hard, her teeth chattered together.

Never even using the water to cleanse herself of the grime of her journey, nor picking any food off the tray, or even examining her face in the mirror, she climbed weakly under the covers, then faded into blessed oblivion.

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The cold was so dense, no warmth could penetrate it. Icy tendrils crept over her body like clinging vines. Her limbs were too frozen to lift. Her body, piled under mounds of blankets, continued to shiver uncontrollably.

Sleep was more torment than relief, as discomfort held her in its greedy grasp.

*Is this death?*

And then, almost as suddenly as the cold arrived, it departed. There was a presence in the bed, something warm and solid. The heat radiating off of it seeped into her skin, into her very bones, lending the warmth she so desperately needed.  Had a maid brought another warming brick whilst she slept?

She turned toward the source of heat and found herself bound by arms so solid they could have been hewn of iron. A bare chest, a fine dusting of hair across the broad width of it that felt so familiar beneath her cheek.

Ah. What torment, that she should dream of Ram now, when it was the flesh and blood man she needed most. She wept in despair.

“Hush, Izzy. Don’t cry. All will be well. Tell me what you need.” A hand stroked her forehead.

The Ram of her dreams was speaking to her. *What sweet agony.* She couldn’t say the things she most needed to say to her real husband, so she would say them to the dream version. She might never have a chance again.

“I need Ramsay.” She choked on a sob. “I love him so much,” she whispered, then she cried harder, clasping at the arms of her vision. The dream version of Ram stiffened for the briefest of moments, then held her tighter. His warm arms enveloped her, sharing his heat when she needed it most.

Cocooned in warmth, her tears slowly subsided and she drifted back into oblivion.

***

Though it was the dead of night and no light touched the chamber, Ram stared at the woman in his arms, trying to make out any discernible feature. He was starved for the sight of her, though it had barely been two days since he’d seen her last.

Remorse choked him for the way he’d treated her then, for letting her think he could ever use her like a common whore, and for

rejecting her avowal of love. He already knew from her actions that she loved him, but hearing her fever induced declaration would have brought him to his knees had he not been lying in the bed beside her. Sweet Jesus.

Tucking the blankets more tightly around her, he leaned against the headboard, Izzy reclining on his chest, and ran his hand over her hair, exhausted beyond measure. He'd not had even one moment of rest since he'd left London, determined to overtake her on the road and confirm with his own eyes she was well. He'd stopped only to change mounts and leave instructions for Mercury to be brought home after the horse had been well rested and fed.

Ram hadn't reckoned on Izzy's choice to stop at Chesworth House, instead of traveling to her father's home. He'd almost panicked when he'd arrived at the Beaumont country home, only to find she'd never made it there. But then, remembering her arrival in London, some instinct had sent him rushing to Chesworth.

The relief of finding her was short lived, and turned to dread when Hawthorne confirmed that not only had Laurence not exaggerated her state, but that she'd arrived ill in the night. Ram ordered the butler to send for a doctor at dawn's first light, then sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Dread transformed to horror when he'd barged into the chamber they'd shared on their wedding night, only to find her shivering and delirious in the great bed. Unresponsive. He hadn't wasted time even lighting a taper. He'd stripped to his breeches and climbed into bed, taking her into his arms to share his warmth.

Her shivering abated, but she moved restlessly against him, as if she couldn't gain a comfortable position. He murmured calming words and stroked his hands lightly down her hair and arms. Finally, she shifted onto her side and draped herself across him, her soft breasts crushed against his chest, her head nestled beneath his chin, and her restlessness subsided.

Knowing he might not get the chance to rest during the day while he tended her, Ram shut his eyes. He could gain a few hours sleep before dawn. He forced all thoughts and fears away, until finally, sleep claimed him.

Ram jerked awake from a deep sleep, blinking hard, disoriented, until he remembered where he was. A glance toward the window revealed it was still night. Dawn hadn't yet begun to break.

Izzy, still lying across his chest, kicked restlessly at the blankets as she mumbled and suddenly the heat radiating from her in waves buffeted him. Her fever now burned dangerously high.

He slid from the bed, heart pounding, and fumbled to light enough tapers to illuminate the room. He saw the tray a maid had left for her, along with a pitcher of water. As quickly as he could he rummaged for a washcloth, then scooped up the basin from the washstand along with the pitcher and returned to the bed.

He almost dropped it all when he saw Izzy's face illuminated by candlelight.

"Christ!" he bit out. Fury kindled within him, driving away his horror. He set everything on a nightstand, then sat on the bed near her hip, staring down at her. Even through the sheen of sweat

gathered on her skin, bruises stood out in stark contrast against her pale skin. Her eye had been blackened and the bruising continued across the delicate skin of her cheek, almost to her hairline. Another bruise, uglier and darker than the other, spread across her jaw, from beneath her ear to her chin. Ram's hand trembled as he reached out to gently probe her jaw and cheek, looking for a break.

Why? Why had Huntley done this? What the hell happened between them?

Never in his life had Ram experienced such a driving need to kill. Still, he forced it aside with brutal intent. He couldn't care for Izzy properly if his mind remained filled with rage and focused on Huntley.

He wet the washcloth and soaked it, then stroked it gently over her face, then down her neck, her arms, her legs. He trailed the cloth over her chest, and under her arms. Over and over he repeated the motion.

She grew restless again, kicking out with her feet, flailing her arms.

"Hush, Izzy, hush. I'm here," he murmured, again and again.

He grew worried when, after he'd sponged her for at least an hour, she was no cooler to the touch. His worry turned to full-blown alarm when she started mumbling incoherently and her eyes rolled. He dropped the cloth and tore to the door, prepared to shout the house down, but as it turned out, there was no need. Hawthorne had pulled up a chair outside the chamber door. He jerked awake when Ram sent the slab of oak slamming against the wall.

“I need the bathing tub, filled with cold water, Hawthorne. Hurry. Knock and leave it outside the door. I’ll bring it in.”

Hawthorne’s face paled in concern, before he sprinted down the hall.

Ram returned to Izzy’s side and picked up the cloth, dipping it in the water and starting his ministrations again. As he listened to the sounds of the tub hauled across the second floor, he talked to her softly. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’ll feel better soon. Hawthorne is drawing you a cool bath.”

He was at the door a heartbeat after the knock came. It took all his strength to wrestle the heavy tub into the room, but he focused on the task with single-minded determination and didn’t stop until it stood before the hearth. Then he returned to the bed.

He stared down at Izzy, hating what he had to do, the torment he must now inflict. Steeling himself against tender emotions, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bath. He lowered her, chemise and all, into the water.

She cried out and flailed her arms but he held her down with a firm grip, forcing her to remain submerged under the needle-sharp cold of the water. She was so weakened he didn’t have to exert himself at all to restrain her. She started to cry and his heart twisted, but still he held her, forcing her head back until her hair was soaked, until she went limp and ceased fighting.

Ram didn’t draw another deep breath until her eyes ceased rolling. He stroked her forehead while he kept her in the water a little longer. His relief was probably greater than hers when he bent to

scoop her from the tub.

As he lifted her into his arms once more, she cried out sharply. It was a sound filled with agony, and Ram froze. Had he inadvertently hurt her when she'd struggled in the water? She whimpered and the proof of her distress galvanized him into action. He bore her to the bed and laid her down. The moment her backside made contact with the silk sheets, she cried out in pain again.

He eased her onto her side, instantly alarmed at the dried bloodstains on her chemise. Grasping the hem of the garment, he pulled it up over her hips, then lifted her arms so he could draw it over her head.

His breath escaped on a strangled gasp as he tried to make sense of the sight before him. Angry red welts crisscrossed her lower back, buttocks, and thighs. He recognized them immediately as the marks of a switch. Her soft skin had been laid open, mostly in the places where one welt crossed another. Obviously her fever-induced stupor had lessened her awareness of the pain, but the bath revived her somewhat and now she hurt.

*What in the name of all that was holy had happened to her at White Hall?*

His breath came in shallow pants as he examined each ugly red welt, looking for any place where her skin had torn deep enough to become infected. Then he went to the door where Hawthorne still sat in his chair, waiting to be of assistance.

"I need soap and a salve for wounds."

The butler's eyes widened, but he asked no questions before he

went in search of the items requested of him. Ram shut the door, then leaned his forehead against it. He closed his eyes and waited, breathing harshly. He wasn't yet sure of the whom, but someone would suffer for what had been done to Izzy. He was no longer certain Huntley was to blame, as the man had never shown anything but a sort of distracted kindness toward Izzy on each occasion Ram had found them in one another's company. White Hall was nearly abandoned. Practically anyone could have accosted her and there would have been few, if any, courtiers to come to her aid, or even witness an assault.

Hawthorne knocked softly upon the door and Ram opened it, taking the items from the butler's hands with gratitude. Hawthorne, anticipating his needs, had placed a fresh washcloth on the tray with the soap and ointment, as well as a platter of cold meats and a bottle of wine with a glass for Ram.

Ram set aside the food and drink and carried everything else to the bed. Then he stood for a long moment, staring at the angry welts that marred her soft, delicate skin, knowing he had to hurt her yet again. He swallowed hard and eased himself onto the bed, stroking her hair.

"Izzy, my love, I must tend your wounds. This might hurt, but you're the bravest woman I've ever known. Please try to be strong, my darling." He didn't know what she could hear in her lethargic, feverish state, but he spoke soothing words anyway. He wet the cloth and soaped it, then, taking a deep breath, gently cleansed the first welt. She flinched beneath his hands but didn't cry out. He prayed to God

she heard and understood him and perhaps drew comfort from his presence.

Before he applied the ointment he decided to examine her carefully for any other wounds. He moved her hair aside and scrutinized her neck, her upper back, her shoulders, her arms. A mark on her wrist drew his focus and he lifted her hand to study it closer. There were scrapes on her skin where something had rubbed it raw. He frowned, turning her hand. The abrasions went all the way around her wrist.

He stiffened at a sudden inkling and lifted her other arm. The marks on the wrist matched those of the other.

Sonofabitch! Huntley had *tied* her to his bed!

The implication of everything he was seeing hit him and he shook with dread. His hands trembled so violently he had to ball them into fists and then relax them numerous times before he gained control over his fear and fury. When he was sure his touch wouldn't cause her more hurt he eased Izzy very gently onto her back and then slid his hands to her thighs and applied pressure to part them. She went taut beneath his touch.

"Nay!" she cried, clamping her legs together with a strength she'd not had a moment ago, "Please, don't! Please!" her voice rose with hysteria.

Ram closed his eyes and swallowed hard over the lump that rose in his throat. "Oh, Izzy, nay." He immediately withdrew his hands, then lay beside her, using an elbow to support himself, then pulled her onto her side so he could wrap an arm around her and hold

her close. He stroked her hair, her back, her shoulder, and her arms until her agitation abated. “Izzy.” His fingers burrowed into her hair, cradling her head. She trembled against him. “Izzy, I’ll not hurt you, sweetheart.” He massaged her scalp. “Please, Izzy. Let me help you. Let me tend your hurts.”

When she lay quiet once more, he again eased her to her back. This time she didn’t fight it when he drew her legs apart.

He bit back a furious curse. There were scratches and abrasions on her inner thighs and most delicate skin. Never in his life had he fought as he did in that moment to keep anger at bay. If he touched her with even a hint of the fury bubbling inside him he could inadvertently hurt her.

When he was sure his hands were once more steady, he retrieved the washcloth and soap and cleansed the scrapes as gently as possible. Then he reached for the salve, spreading it on the soft flesh of her thighs. When he finished he turned her onto her stomach and treated the welts on her back with the ointment.

He placed his hand on her forehead. She still burned with fever, but she wasn’t nearly as warm to the touch as she had been before the bath. *God, don’t let her fever rise again!* He couldn’t subject her to another bath like the one he’d just forced on her. Should he be relieved that she had no telltale pustules on her skin?

He ran a shaking hand over his mouth, then stretched out beside her again, stroking her upper back lightly. He lowered his lips to her ear. “I love you, Izzy,” he whispered. “No matter what happened, I love you.” He could have sworn she relaxed slightly, but

then again he was so tired and gutted it was entirely possible his mind was playing tricks on him, that he saw what he wanted to see.

Finally, he arose and went to the door, opening it. Hawthorne sat slumped in the chair, dozing, but came to immediate attention when Ram stepped outside and drew the door closed quietly behind him.

"How is she, my lord?"

"The fever has lessened, but I won't know any relief until a doctor has seen her."

"He said he'll be along tomorrow, as soon as he's able."

Ram wanted to show up at the doctor's door and drag him back to Chesworth, but he grudgingly restrained himself.

"She's sleeping. Will you listen for her, and have me fetched if she awakens or becomes agitated at all?"

"Of course, my lord. Where will I find you if necessary?"

"I'll be on the terrace."

Ram clasped the longtime butler's shoulder, then strode downstairs to the dining room and crossed to the door that led onto a terrace bordered by a short wall. The night was balmy; the late summer wind lifted his hair and fluttered it. He walked across the flagstones and gripped the stone balustrade, staring out over the rugged, yet beautiful Cornish landscape.

His eyes stung as his vision blurred.

The bastard raped her. It was Izzy who dealt Huntley the scratches down his cheek while trying to fight him.

Ram had told her she deserved everything she would get with

Huntley, but he never meant this; he *never* wanted this for her.

This was as much his fault as it was Huntley's. Izzy had undertaken a mission of mercy on *his* behalf; one that was wholly unnecessary. Because of him she'd been tied to a bed, whipped, and raped.

How could he live with that? How could she?

His breath became raspy as he pictured the scene in his mind, made all the easier for having seen the straps Huntley used on her. He couldn't stop himself from thinking of the pain she'd suffered or how terrified she must have been to be at Huntley's mercy in that way. Ram wiped wetness from his cheeks. He didn't have to imagine all of it though. Hadn't he once tended her the very same way, on their wedding night, after he'd done the same thing to her himself? He was no better than Huntley; the only difference between he and the other man was that Ram had the legal right to force his will upon her. But legal or not, he'd been as beastly as Huntley.

Because of him, the vibrant, beautiful girl with a zest for life he'd met on May Day had become a pale shadow of her former self.

He loved her enough to want what was best for her, and he no longer believed he was that. He would see her through this crisis, as long as it took. If she was pregnant, either with his child or Huntley's, he'd give the child the protection of his name and let her live her life however she desired. If she wasn't pregnant he'd give her an annulment and leave her in peace. Though he'd rather lose a limb than lose her, if there was even a chance that vivacious girl still existed inside her, it would be well worth his heartache.

His heart was leaden as he returned to the house.

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Izzy was cold again. Not the kind of sharp cold she'd dreamed about, when she'd been swimming in a cold lake, unable to climb out because something had weighed her down in the water, but the kind of cold that she'd suffered before. It invaded her bones, through her skin. She was cold inside. Maybe it was because she was alone in her dream. She frowned. If this was her dream, why wasn't Ram there anymore? She'd dreamed of him before, when she was cold like this, and he'd come and taken the cold away.

She cried his name.

And suddenly he was there with her again. His arms were around her and he was sharing his warmth, his love. "You came!" she whispered.

"I'll always come when you call me, Sweetheart."

She smiled and gripped his hand. "I love you."

Warm once more, she tumbled back into oblivion.

Ram stared at the small hand that held his so tightly, fighting desperation and fear. She was so very ill, and he was powerless to stop the sickness that held her tightly in its grasp. He'd been returning to the bedchamber when she cried out for him. He'd rushed to her side to find her shivering again. The fever was on the rise again.

He lay by her side, holding her close, watching through the window as the red and orange fingers of dawn began to crawl across the sky. After an hour or so he slipped his hand from hers and went to

the door.

Hawthorne was still keeping a vigil in the chair.

"Hawthorne, I need broth, barley water, and ale."

"I'll order it immediately." The butler stood. "My lord? If you care to rest at any time, only say the word and I'll gladly watch over my lady for you."

"Have you been exposed to smallpox?"

Hawthorne shook his head. "I'll still tend her. You can't continue like this."

"Nay, I'll not risk your health. Send down to the village for a woman who has been exposed to smallpox and is willing to work as a nurse." While the butler was fetching the food and drink, Ram took a few moments to wolf down some cold meat and cheese and wash it all down with a glass of wine. Hawthorne's knock came just as he finished. Ram went to the door and took the tray the butler had in his hands, then handed him the empty one.

Ram shut the door with his hip, and carried the tray to the bedside table. He glanced at Izzy as he laid the burden down, surprised to see her staring at him, her eyes bright with fever. Her tongue darted out to wet her dry and cracked lips.

"Here, sweetheart, drink some of this." Sliding his arm around her shoulder to support her upright, he held the barley water to her lips, urging her to drink slowly when she greedily sipped at it.

When the water was gone, he spoon-fed her warm broth. She made no protest, only watched him with trusting eyes, swallowing each spoonful he held to her lips.

She was so very pale, and yet, there were no marks upon her face.

She whispered something as he settled her back against the pillows.

"What is it, my love?" he smoothed her damp hair off her forehead.

"Papa. Papa, I'm so sorry. Won't you please forgive me?"

He swallowed hard. She must be hallucinating. His heart twisted. He should have insisted she make amends with her father, when she had the chance. Now it might be too late.

*Nay! It wouldn't be too late.* He refused to let her die.

If she died, the sunshine would be gone from his life forever.

"Papa, I don't want the annulment, I swear. Not anymore. Will you tell Ram for me? Will you tell him that and something else?"

Shaking off his morose thoughts, he concentrated once again on his wife. "Shh, Izzy. You need your strength. Lie back and sleep, sweetheart, and you can tell him yourself."

She gripped his wrist with unexpected strength. "I will. But you have to promise you'll tell him for me, Papa, just in case."

"Tell him what, Izzy?" he stroked the heated flesh of her arm.

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I didn't know Paul would do what he did." Her voice grew hoarse. "Tell Ram I'm so sorry, and that I love him. I…" her voice trailed off as she slumped back against the pillow, exhausted.

Ram tried to swallow past the lump clogging his throat. "He knows, sweetheart, I swear he does. And he loves you, too. But you'll

soon get well, and you *will* tell him yourself, do you understand me?"

Her lips curved into a small smile, and she nodded slightly, without ever lifting her lids, as though they were too heavy to even warrant an attempt.

Moments later her eyes shot open and she lurched toward the side of the bed. She began to vomit all the broth he had painstakingly fed her.

Leaping to place a receptacle beneath her, he held her in his arms as she retched.

Closing his eyes, Ram began to pray. *Please God. Please, don't let her die!*

***

Ram redoubled his efforts. Though Izzy continued to vomit everything he fed her, he was determined to keep going until she kept something in her stomach. After each feeding he cleaned the mess, then thoroughly cooled her with a damp washcloth, then began the process all over again.

Worry gripped him and confusion too. He'd been by her side for nigh on twelve hours, listening to the sound of her breathing, watching the rise and fall of her chest, anticipating anything she might need to fight her illness.

The day had come and gone. Night would soon fall again.

And still, there wasn't a single pockmark anywhere on her body. Each time he cooled her with the washcloth he examined her. When shivers wracked her and he climbed under the blankets to lend her warmth, he checked her, and again when the sweat beaded on her

brow and he'd lifted her to change the sheets beneath her, after he'd once more bathed her with the damp cloth.

Frustration and fear gnawed at him. He went to the chamber door again, Hawthorne, stoic as a rock and still keeping his vigil, jumped to his feet.

"Send someone for the doctor again! I don't give a bloody damn where he is or who he's tending, get him here within the hour!"

"Aye, sir. Immediately."

Ram watched Hawthorne make his way quickly down the hall, then he retreated back into the bedroom, taking a seat in a chair beside the bed. In the distance he could hear the rumbling sounds of thunder as it grew nearer, the only indication that time was marching forward outside of Izzy's sick room. She was exhausted from all that he'd forced on her. Her eyes were sunken and purple smudges marred the delicate skin beneath each eye. Nothing he did seemed to help.

Still, Ram refused to give up. He shrugged the stiffness from his shoulders, then once more slid behind her to support her against his chest as he held the goblet of barley water to her lips and forced her to drain it all. Then he lay her back against the pillows and waited, receptacle in hand.

When a quarter of an hour passed and she didn't vomit, Ram drew his first real sigh of relief, allowing himself to hope.

He went in search of a night rail in expectation of the doctor's visit, but the drawers and wardrobe were empty. His eyes fell on the valise she'd brought from London that lay where she'd dropped it. He knelt and rummaged through it. His fingers brushed a piece of

parchment and he drew it out. Unfolding it, he scanned the contents, then read the note from her father more slowly a second time. His fist clenched at the harsh words, at the heavy burden the Baron had lain upon her.

"Oh, Izzy." He murmured. The contents of the letter must have devastated her. He frowned, wondering why she had allowed Belinda to believe everything between Izzy and her father was fine.

With the clarity of hindsight the answer came to him. She'd done it so Belinda would believe Izzy had gone to Eric's as she claimed she would, and Belinda would follow her there. When Belinda arrived and discovered Izzy wasn't actually there, it would be too late to do anything about it.

Ram returned the letter to the valise, then pulled out a pink night rail and returned to Izzy's side. Her loyalty to those she loved was absolute. Izzy would tell any lie, willingly sacrifice anything and everything to protect those who'd earned her love, and somehow Ram was lucky enough to be counted amongst those who had. Once given, it was not something she easily turned her back on, which was why she'd continued to defend Huntley, even after he betrayed her. 'Twas why she'd put herself at risk, gone to White Hall for Ram's sake, despite the way he'd used her and deliberately hurt her and his callous rejection of her generous offer of love.

He recognized, too late, that if he'd earned even the smallest amount of the loyalty she'd given to Huntley, he was the luckiest man alive.

He stroked her cheek. If only he'd realized the truth earlier, she

would have been spared so much.

He had so many regrets, not the least of which that he hadn't told her he loved her until she was ill, when he didn't know if she even understood his words.

Gently, he slipped the night rail over her head and arms, then picked up the broth once more and bent to his task.

***

"Influenza?" Ram bellowed in disbelief.

Dr. Norman Sandborne frowned in disapproval at the volume of Ram's voice. Ram flushed beneath the man's glower. The good doctor had arrived within the hour proscribed, with about three minutes to spare.

Upon the doctor's arrival, Ram explained the death of the Princess Royal from smallpox and of the contagion sweeping the court. And then after a thorough examination, Dr. Sandborne had diagnosed Izzy's illness. Influenza. For the first time in days Ram allowed himself to hope, just the tiniest bit.

"It's true that smallpox can cause many of the same symptoms as influenza, but were she infected with Smallpox she'd have developed the telltale spots by now.

Ram didn't know whether to laugh in disbelief or swoon in utter relief. His legs were suddenly weak and his heart pounded as his fear crested, then receded like a giant wave, crashing against the shore and then fading away, leaving smooth calmness behind. "She will recover? You're sure of this?"

"Influenza is quite serious, my lord, and your wife is very ill.

She'll need to remain abed for at least a se'nnight. You must give her plenty of fluids as well. But she is young and in good health. There's no reason to believe she will not recover in due time."

Ram whooped with happiness, this time not caring if the doctor frowned about it. Izzy would be well!

He showed the doctor to the door himself, handing the man an exorbitant fee for bringing such wonderful news. Some of the doctor's disgruntlement faded as he received his due.

"Should your wife's condition worsen or you have need of me for any reason, do not hesitate to send your man." Dr. Sandborne shot a wary look in Hawthorne's direction, leaving Ram to speculate in amusement what bullying techniques the butler had resorted to in order to rouse the man at this time of night.

With a nod, the physician went on his way. Ram bounded up the stairs to the bedchamber, his spirits lighter than they'd been in weeks.

Izzy would recover; she'd be all right.

He climbed into the bed beside her, took her into his arms, and succumbed to exhaustion.

# Chapter 32

Lucien stared at Belinda, sitting across the coach from him, watching her gaze mindlessly out the window.

He'd delayed their journey for as long as humanly possible. Or about as long as it was possible for a man to naysay a woman stoically resisting tears. First he'd insisted she pen a note to Izzy's parent's explaining the situation, then he'd come up with a veritable laundry list of things necessary for him to do before he could leave London for an extended period. He'd made sure the carriage driver reported one of the horses was limping and Lucien had insisted they delay leaving until the following morn.

It took six hours the next morning before he finally capitulated, when he returned from a hastily improvised "business errand" and come face to face with a distraught Belinda in his foyer, her eyes glistening with tears of frustration and concern. By then the maid, Meg, had taken ill and was abed, no longer able to serve as a makeshift chaperone. It would be just Belinda and he in the carriage for what would be a very long ride.

They'd been on the road for a few hours now, though they'd spoken very little to one another. Did she feel the tension stretched taut between them in the confinement of the carriage, too?

What a bloody fool he'd been to agree to this. How was he to spend two days in a closed carriage with her when he could barely resist the urge to take her into his arms! They were walking a fine line

as it was without a chaperone or even a maid along to properly protect her reputation.

Should her legal guardian get wind of this, it was entirely conceivable he'd have to marry the chit.

He was utterly startled when the normal, full-body shudder that usually accompanied thoughts of a potential marriage failed to materialize. It was generally his belief that anyone or anything who could turn usual into unusual warranted extra time and attention, for it was the unusual that made life entertaining, so Lucien studied Belinda's profile in careful detail. He didn't even understand what it was about her that drew him so. There was just something about those exotic eyes when they turned and locked on his, something elusive that made him yearn for things he'd never before desired. Things that were missing, that he'd never before even wanted. Stability. A home. Family. Love.

He shuddered. She was a sorceress and yet didn't know it. *Innocent witch.*

As if she sensed his eyes upon her, she turned to face him. Those beautiful cat eyes of hers were luminous, filled with concern, anxiety, and fear. And could he blame her? He would be sick at the thought of losing his brother. Though she and Izzy were not blood sisters, no two siblings could be closer.

Against his better judgment he shifted to her side of the carriage, squeezing in beside her.

Her eyes widened and her mouth parted, a slight breath escaping that feathered across his cheek. "What are you doing, my

lord?"

Amusement suffused him at her attempt to create an invisible barrier between them by returning to formalities, when he'd held her feet in his hands and kissed her breathless once before.

"I'm distracting you, *Belinda*." he took her face between his hands and stroked his thumbs across the soft skin over her delicate cheekbones. Her eyes flicked from side to side, the tip of her tongue darted out to tease her lower lip. "You look as if you're about to cry, and I won't abide that. So I've decided it's my duty to distract you."

At this moment she was no sorceress or seductress. Right now she put him more to mind of a skittish kitten. A jumpy little creature that might be tamed by the gentle stroking of his hand. The right touch might even make her purr. A part of him was so tempted to take up the challenge he'd unintentionally thrown down for himself. Could he make her purr or would she hiss and spit at him instead? His breeches were suddenly snug at the thought of Belinda laid out naked on his bed, whimpering and mewling with pleasure as he thrust into her and she sank her claws into his back. *Temptress kitten.*

Bloody Hell.

He yanked his wayward thoughts from the path they'd so enticingly wandered. Enough of what was going on his head must have shown on his face though. As if she'd peeked into his mind and glimpsed the same image he'd conjured, a pink blush bloomed on her cheeks beneath his fingers and he found himself fascinated by his affect on her.

Which was only fair, as he was equally fascinated by her effect

on him.

“Lucien?” She whispered, his name escaping her lips on a sighing breath, a mix of confusion and longing. It seemed to hang in the air between them. Unable to resist, he lowered his mouth to hers with a groan of capitulation.

For a moment she remained unresponsive. And then a breathy moan escaped and her arms went round his neck, her hands anchoring into his hair. He caressed her lips with his, softly at first, then with growing urgency as she pressed herself more tightly against him.

When her lips parted and he slipped his tongue inside to taste her, it was like nothing he’d ever experienced before. She was fiery innocence, delicious temptation. Heaven in his arms. Need exploded within him and he angled her head so he could fuse his mouth more firmly against hers, take her breath as his own. His tongue swept across her teeth, then dipped to touch the soft inner skin of her lower lip.

When she took his tongue between her teeth and sucked him further into her own mouth, spikes of flaming need coursed through his veins, heating a path directly to his groin. His cock strained against his breeches, yearning for her attention.

He pressed her against the squabs with his weight, felt the luscious softness of her breasts as they flattened beneath his chest. She lay back without a protest, only adjusted herself to fit more snugly to him. He tore his mouth from hers and trailed a hot row of kisses over her jaw and down her neck, tonguing the hollow at the base of her throat. She panted with desire, no remonstration issuing forth from

her lips.

Continuing his journey lower, he traced the modest neckline of her gown with his tongue, then moved lower. His seeking mouth found her taut nipple through the fabric, and he latched on to it, sucking hard. Her body bucked beneath his, arching into him, her hands curled into fists on his shoulders.

Her breasts were the stuff of fantasy, round and full, yet uplifted. Perfect. They would be perfect when he released them from the confines of her gown and stays. With that goal in mind his hands crept under her raised arms, around her back, to remove the unwanted barrier of her gown.

Some semblance of control invaded the haze of passion that had formed around them. His hands froze in horror.

*Holy Hell! I'm about to make love to a virgin in my carriage!*

What the hell was the matter with him?

Feeling like the biggest ass in the world, he sprang off her, returning to the seat opposite, which was as far away as he could get in the blasted carriage. Not nearly bloody far enough for his liking.

Her passion glazed eyes slowly focused. As he watched, a variety of emotions crossed her face, so easy to read. Desire, amazement, then confusion, and finally hurt. When her lower lip started to tremble, remorse tore at him.

"Oh, Kitten. Don't look at me like that, please."

She righted herself on the seat, hastily smoothing her hands across her gown to make sure all was in place. Her dark gold hair, which had been so neatly coiffed, now hung in charming disarray past

her shoulders. Her lips were swollen and moist from his kisses, her cheeks still flushed from her first taste of desire. It stunned him to discover he wanted her more than he remembered ever wanting any other woman.

"Lucien? I don't understand"-

Neither did he. "I apologize, Miss Spencer. I shouldn't have taken advantage of your worry and fear for your cousin. I'm surprised no one yet warned you I have a reputation as something of a libertine."

The color in her cheeks heightened. "Don't you want me?"

He clenched his eyes shut. Those were *not* the words he expected. She should be giving him a blistering set-down. Couldn't she see there was nothing he desired more? Christ, all he wanted right then was to drag her skirts to her waist and thrust inside her tight, hot sheath again and again, lose himself in her wet, quivering depths until he was mindless and she screamed with pleasure beneath him, begging him to bring her release.

He dragged a trembling hand down his face and redirected his thoughts with difficulty. Forcing himself to gentle his tone, he tried to explain. "Belinda, it's not proper for us to be alone like this. I realize these are special circumstances, but what we just did should never have been allowed to happen. If anyone ever found out about what just occurred between us, your reputation would be ruined."

Her eyes hardened. "And you might be forced to marry me, and you cannot abide the thought."

His kitten definitely had claws. For a moment he considered

arguing with her that nothing could be farther from the truth, but he sure as hell wasn't going down that road right now while they were alone in this carriage! Better to let her think that was the way things stood.

"I apologize."

"Keep your bloody apology, Lord Lucien. It means nothing to me." She turned bodily to the side, anchoring her gaze out the window.

***

Two hours later they still hadn't spoken another word to one another. A gentle rain began to fall, but as the evening progressed, the shower turned into a gale. Water clogged the roads and their pace slowed to a crawl, as the driver had to carefully maneuver the horses so they didn't slip in the mud and injure themselves.

They would not get much farther that evening. Lucien rapped on the ceiling to gain the driver's attention, then poked his head out into the rain. "No sense in continuing on tonight, Jake. Let's find the next inn and get dry for the evening."

"Aye, sir."

Lucien settled back into the carriage, shaking the rain droplets from his hair. Still Belinda refused to look at him.

He supposed he'd injured her feelings with what she no doubt saw as his rejection of her. But there was nothing to be done for it. In fact, it irked him she didn't recognize the nobility of his actions. Surely if they had continued on that course, upon waking in the morning she would have regretted with all her heart giving away her

virginity on the seat of a coach. *Wouldn't she?*

It was another three quarters or so of an hour before Lucien noticed the gradual slowing as Jake brought the team to a stop. Anxious to put some space between himself and the object of his desire, Lucien opened the door and leaped to the ground. Shielding his eyes from the sting of the rain, he spoke to both Belinda and the driver. "Stay here until I've arranged lodging."

Belinda looked at him but said nothing. Jake nodded.

He picked his way through the mud towards the Tudor style inn. Beneath the oak and plaster would be a place they could get warm and procure food. He could find solitude. It was a haven.

It seemed many a weary and rain-sodden traveler had picked this place to stop for the evening. The stables were filled to capacity while carriages and coaches lined the side of the road.

Upon opening the door, he was immediately assailed with the delicious smell of savory meat roasting and freshly baked bread along with the tangy odor of ale. The eating room was crammed with diners, each table taken by tired and hungry travelers. Still, it would be a cozy enough place to spend the evening.

Making his way to the bar, he asked after the proprietor and within moments was greeted by a short, balding man with a rounded form. He took Lucien's measure in one glance.

"How may I be of help my lord?"

"I have need of two rooms for the evening."

The small man winced. "I'm afraid that won't be possible. I've only one room left to let."

It suddenly seemed very warm inside the inn. Lucien pulled at his collar. He could *not* spend a night alone in a bedchamber with Belinda.

"Surely you've an extra room you keep for emergencies, good sir? If it's a matter of coin…" his voice trailed off as the innkeeper shook his head.

"It's the storm, my lord. We are filled to capacity, and then some. The room I can offer you *is* my emergency room. It's my daughter's chamber, but I'll have her stay with me and the wife tonight. There will be hardly any space in the stable for your coachman as it is."

Lucien groaned in frustration as his plan to deposit Belinda in a room and hunker down in the stables alongside Jake turned to ashes. Could this evening get any worse?

"I'll take the room, then." Lucien slid a few coins across to the man. "Could you arrange to bring a meal for two up within a few moments, and arrange for food and ale for my driver?"

"Indeed I can, sir."

"Many thanks."

After the proprietor had shown Lucien which room was to be his torture chamber, he took a deep, fortifying breath and went out into the storm again. He trudged back through the mud to the coach. After instructing the driver to seek the innkeeper for food and ale after seeing to the horses, Lucien turned to Belinda.

"Come." He held out his hand. "I've secured a warm, dry, room for the evening."

For a moment he thought she would ignore his help and leap down by herself, but she seemed to appreciate the dangers of launching herself into the slippery mud, sulk aside. Placing her hand in his, she let him help her to the ground. He couldn't resist giving her hand a quick squeeze.

The sky chose that moment to explode open with stunning violence. Rain slashed down on them diagonally, stinging as it met flesh. Belinda had to hold her gown up so she could see where she placed her feet, hampering their progress, and in the short time it took to reach the inn they were both drenched to the bone.

As he stepped back to allow her to enter before him, he expected to find her dismayed, so when he glanced at her and saw her grinning he was taken aback.

"*What* is so amusing?" he grunted as he took her elbow and lead her toward the huge hearth.

She laughed, uninhibited for the first moment since their heated embrace in the carriage. "I love storms like this, Lucien. There's nothing better than curling up in a warm bed with a book on a night like this."

His mouth ran dry as he instantly pictured her in a huge bed on a rainy night, wearing a silk bed gown, but in his imagination it certainly wasn't a *book* she'd curled up with.

It was going to be a long night.

He let her stand for a few minutes before the fire and wring out her hair, then ushered her up the stairs to their designated room.

It was a small space, though neatly kept. A comfortable looking

bed covered with clean white sheets sat in the corner, with a wash basin set beside it. A little table with two chairs stood beneath shuttered windows that pinged with the music of raindrops hitting it. Nothing in the room suggested it belonged to the innkeeper's daughter.

It was cozy. And very small. Too small. Though Lucien suspected King's Charles personal bedchamber itself wouldn't be spacious enough for him right now, with Belinda sharing the same quarters.

"And where shall you stay, my lord?"

Her voice snapped him back to their dilemma. He smiled ruefully. "This is the very last chamber in the inn. It appears I'll have to stay here, with you."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he rushed on. "I'll sleep on the floor, Belinda. You need not fear I'll do anything inappropriate."

Her face hardened. "No, we can't have that, can we?"

Inwardly he groaned. Did she *want* him to make love to her that evening? It was a good thing she was an inexperienced virgin, he wouldn't be able to withstand a full-fledged assault from a seductress Belinda.

They stood, staring at one another in silence. Then she turned her back.

"Would you help me with my gown? Normally I'd be more than capable of doing it myself, but the rain will have made it an impossible task."

He amended his earlier thought. This was going to be the longest night of his life, without a doubt.

Stepping close, he undid the necessary laces, his fingers overly clumsy for a man used to divesting women of their clothing at record speeds. If Belinda could blame the rain, so then could he. It was true enough the rain had swelled the fabric, making it a more difficult task. Nay, there was nothing wrong with his ability to get a woman out of her garments.

At the moment he was having a hard time bringing to mind a woman he'd ever wanted to undress more than he did Belinda.

His eyes focused in on a drop of rain as it slowly made its way down the nape of her neck. He resisted the urge to lick it off of her.

With what could only be described as a Herculean effort he turned his back as she shimmied out of the gown. The sound of fabric sliding against skin sent blood pounding to his groin. He forced himself to not imagine what she would look like standing behind him in nothing but a damp, transparent chemise.

Too bloody late for that!

He heard the sound of her footsteps as she padded to the bed, and prayed she was wrapping herself completely under the blanket. Finally able to take a breath for the first time in minutes, Lucien removed his sodden garments, stripping down to his breeches. When he turned around it was to find his prayers answered. Belinda was bundled up so tightly in the blankets, he couldn't make out her form. *Thank God.*

But then he noticed her gaze locked on his bare chest, an

expression of hungry fascination on her face. She was guileless, every emotion reflected in her beautiful blue eyes, unhidden and honest. So unique. Again she brought to mind a kitten, this time fearless and fixed upon her prey. Oh, how he wanted to be that prey, to give himself over to her mercy and let her play with him as she would. Yield to her and tame her at the same time. Give and take. A look of vulnerable longing crossed her face, and he lost the battle raging within himself. He took two steps toward the bed, intent on taking her in his arms.

A knock at the door drew his attention and he sent up a quick prayer. *Saved by the evening meal!* He started back toward the table. "Come," he barked.

The door opened, but it was not a servant who came bustling in. An older couple stood on the threshold, staring into the room, both with expressions of utter disbelief. A prickle rose on the back of his neck.

The woman turned to the man. "I *told* you it was Belinda!"

"Who the devil are you?" Lucien blurted out, so surprised they knew Belinda's identity he couldn't prevent himself.

"That's the question I should be asking of you, you lecherous swine!" The man shouted, starting toward him.

"Wait!" Belinda's voice was fraught with panic. "Uncle Gerald! I can explain."

The noose tightened about Lucien's neck.

# Chapter 33

Izzy opened her eyes slowly, looking around the unfamiliar bedchamber. *Where am I?* It took a moment for it to sink in. She was in the room she had shared with Ram on their wedding night. She was at Chesworth House

*How did I get here?*

Bits and pieces of memory began to return, like leaves dropping off a tree in winter, one at a time, crisp but off-color. She remembered confronting Paul, but not all the details. He'd demanded coin in exchange for his silence, that much she recalled, and she'd come to Cornwall to find the money. She remembered feeling ill in the carriage, she thought it was Smallpox…but what happened after that? And what had happened in between?

She pressed her hands to her face, looking for any sign she'd been stricken with smallpox, but her skin was smooth to the touch.

Perplexed, she tried to sit up in the big bed. She was so weak, her body so sore, the effort winded her and she collapsed against the pillows, dismayed. Her pitiful attempt at movement roused someone seated in a chair beside the bed, but she closed both eyes, breathing deeply to stop the room spinning.

*How sick am I?*

"Good morn, sleeping beauty."

Her eyes snapped open as she turned toward the chair. "Ram?" She blinked, twice, to make sure she wasn't hallucinating. Her mouth

was dry and fuzzy, like she'd spent an extended period of time sucking on a woolen socking. Not that it truly mattered, for if she'd had any saliva, it would have dried instantly upon seeing Ram seated beside her.

How had he gotten there? *Why* was he there?

"Who else would be in your boudoir at such an early hour?" he teased.

"What are you doing here?"

His smile slipped. "You've been very ill, Izzy. I've been tending you."

"You have?" she whispered, confused. "But…why?" Mama and Papa hadn't come after all. How had Ram found her? "I thought you wanted to be rid of me," She blurted, before she could stop the words.

She held her breath, cursing her foolish outburst and hoping against hope his response wouldn't break her heart all over again.

"We'll have that discussion when you're stronger. For now I only want you to rest and concentrate on getting better."

Tears clogged her throat, made it impossible to respond. It wasn't a curt dismissal, but he hadn't spoken the words she yearned to hear, either. She stared at her hands as they twisted in her lap. When he reached out and took one, she clasped his fingers with all her strength, which to her shock, was not much.

"I love you so much, Ram." She whispered. *I need you so much.*

His eyes widened just the smallest bit, then his gaze held hers. He maneuvered from the chair into the great bed without breaking eye contact, climbing beneath the blankets to take her into his arms.

“I know you do, Sweetheart. I know.”

Pain stabbed at her; the ache in her chest grew. He hadn’t rejected her love this time but he hadn’t accepted or returned it, either.

But still, she was in his arms, a place she’d feared she’d never again be allowed. She turned her face into his chest and snuggled closer. His arms tightened.

“Do you need anything?” he murmured against her hair.

“Nay,” she whispered. And she didn’t. Everything she could ever want or need was here, in this bed, with her. She shifted onto her side so she could put her arms around him, too, and winced at the lancing of pain that snaked through her, focused mostly on her lower back.

Everything that happened at White Hall came rushing back in minute and stunning detail, no longer fuzzy. Paul caused this pain. How long was she ill, and how long until Paul came to Cornwall to collect what she’d promised? Could she force herself to be docile and submit, now knowing what he planned to do to her?

She had to. The reason that forced her to make a devil’s bargain still compelled her. For Ram’s sake, she would endure. She must. There was no other option.

A little voice in her head begged her to tell Ram all that happened and let him make everything better. But how could she? My God, if he even knew what she agreed to, what she’d already allowed Paul to do…it didn’t bear thinking upon. And besides, she had to get used to taking care of her own messes. There was no one left now to

take care of them for her. She was on her own.

It was all so frighteningly overwhelming.

As she thought about submitting to Paul, she trembled with dread.

"What's wrong, Izzy?" Ram's voice, sharp with concern, made her jump.

"You're shivering." He placed his hand against her forehead. "Is your fever returning?"

Oh, God. Ram could never know what happened with Paul. She didn't know how Ram found her or even why he was there, by her side, but it would disgust him if he ever learned of what she did. And rightfully so. It disgusted her. If Ram ever discovered she whored for Paul, he'd never, ever forgive her, no matter what her reasons. He'd hate her forever.

She closed her eyes in anguish.

"Would it help to speak of it?" Ram asked, very quietly.

Her eyes snapped open. She raised her head. He'd lowered his, so his chin rested on his chest as he looked down. She met his concerned gaze and caught her breath. She could swear she saw compassion in his smoky eyes, but that was impossible, wasn't it? He didn't know. He couldn't know! She couldn't bear for him to know.

But he would, and soon. She knew it with every breath in her body. Paul would make certain of it.

Izzy fought the urge to weep her heart out. Her time left with Ram could be counted in days, if not hours. She buried her face against his chest and held him.

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Ram closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Izzy was holding him with such desperation; he could feel it thrumming through the length of her. He'd watched horror, fear, and anguish pass over her face in rapid succession, but didn't know what to do that might ease her pain.

Every instinct told him it could only help if she spoke of what happened to her instead of leaving it to fester inside. But he didn't trust his instincts; they'd failed him terribly in recent days. When it came to Izzy, he made all the wrong decisions. Anger, love, concern, and lust had all mixed together to wreak havoc on his usually sound judgment. He wanted to tell her he knew what happened between her and Huntley, that she could talk to him if she felt comfortable enough to do so, that she was safe, now and forever. But how did one broach such a sensitive subject?

An idea struck him.

He lifted her chin so she had to look him in the eye. "Do you think you can take a little broth, sweetheart? You need sustenance to regain your strength."

The anguish retreated from her eyes as he diverted her attention and she nodded. He put
his lips to her forehead for a prolonged moment, then withdrew from her side and went to the door where he asked Hawthorne to fetch fresh food and drink. While Ram waited he stoked the fire in the hearth, then rummaged through her valise for another clean night rail, which he placed at hand near the bed.

When the food arrived he settled at her side, then propped her

against his chest as he'd done so often in the last few days, and brought spoonfuls of broth to her lips, which she dutifully swallowed. He maintained a running commentary while she ate.

"If you feel sick to your stomach at all, you must tell me right away," he blew on a spoonful of broth to cool it before offering it to her. "I must say, it's far easier to feed you when you're awake," he teased as she swallowed. "I've gotten used to routine over the past few days. After feeding you, I usually bathe you. Would a cool sponge bath make you feel better?" He held a goblet of water to her lips and waited while she drank thirstily. When she finished, she nodded shyly.

He put the empty bowl and goblet aside, then fetched a fresh washcloth and refilled the basin with clean water. After wringing the excess water from the cloth, he drew it down her legs, from knee to foot, then back again, front and back, shin and calf. She sighed and relaxed against the pillow.

He drew the cloth back to her foot, to her toes, then the underside. Her foot flexed in his hand and she giggled. "That tickles," she murmured.

"I must find my amusement some way," he teased, waggling his brows and then stroking his fingertips along the bottom of her foot. He watched her face as he did so, pleased when she watched him through half-slitted eyes, a soft smile upon her lips. He lifted her leg and kissed the sole of her foot. She made a surprised little noise, then sighed with contentment.

He returned to her side at the head of the bed, rinsed the washcloth, wrung it out once more, then bathed her neck and

décolletage. He drew the cloth over a shoulder, then down her slim arm and back again, over her elbow, then once more down to her hand. Just as he'd done with her toes, he bathed each finger, then placed a kiss in her palm and closed her fingers around it.

Her eyes glistened as she watched.

Drawing a deep breath, he lifted her hand and gently placed his lips against her wrist and followed the abrasion there, turning her arm so he could reach every spot. Then he took the salve from the tray, and although the scrapes were healing well, rubbed it gently on her wrist without speaking a word. He repeated the ritual on her other arm.

When he was done, he chanced a look at her face. Her smile had died and she'd caught her lower lip between her teeth, but she continued to watch.

Undeterred, he turned her onto her side, then drew the straps of her night rail off her shoulder, peeling the entire garment down, almost to her waist. He trailed the damp cloth down her neck and across the unmarred flesh of her back, dropping a kiss on her spine. Then he drew the night rail over her hips, exposing the mass of welts on her skin. For the most part they were healing well, except in a few places where the switch had done more than superficial damage. She stiffened when he bathed those spots with care, but he was fair sure it wasn't because he hurt her. Neither of them spoke as he applied the salve with his fingertips. He pulled the night rail back into place, then shifted her to her back again and met her gaze. Her color was high, her cheeks flushed.

“I don’t think you’ll scar overly much, sweetheart. Perhaps only in one or two places,” he murmured.

He bathed her face with the cool water until she relaxed again.

When her eyes drifted close he took a deep breath to steady himself, then pushed the night rail to her waist. He bathed the soft skin of her inner thighs, then applied the ointment to the deeper scratches.

The color had drained from her face, her eyes were clenched tightly shut, and she was breathing shallowly. He put the basin, cloth, and salve on the tray and settled at her side, then caressed the edge of her jaw with the back of his fingers.

“Let’s get you into a clean night rail. You’ll feel better wearing something that’s fresh and clean.”

He drew the soiled cotton garment over her arms and head, then helped her into the clean silk night rail he’d placed on hand near the bed. When he settled it into place, she opened her eyes. The pain and anguish reflected in her gaze took his breath away. If the eyes truly were the windows of the soul, Izzy’s was a soul in torment. He swallowed, hard.

“You know.” She whispered.

He enfolded her small hand in his. “I’ve put the pieces together as best I could and I have a good guess as to what happened.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m so sorry,” she choked.

“Nay!” He reared back in horror and disbelief, releasing her hand, shaking his head emphatically. “Do not *dare* apologize to me!” How could she apologize to *him*, when it was his fault she’d suffered

so terribly? He couldn't bear it.

She covered her face with her hands, weeping inconsolably.

Ram was undone.

He slipped into the bed again and gathered her into his arms, holding her close against him, rocking her gently. "Shh, sweetheart. It's all right. All will be well, my love. All will be well."

As the minutes passed, her tears ran their course. Her hand came to rest on his chest, her fingers clenching and unclenching into a fist. She drew a loud shuddering breath, then another.

"I know you likely don't want to hear anything I have to say. I know nothing I say can excuse what happened but please, I need to tell you *why* it did."

He frowned, rubbing her back, trying to make sense of her words. He stiffened with instant realization.

*She thinks I'm still furious with* her*!*

"Oh, Christ, Izzy. Nay, I'm not angry with you. I swear I'm not." He drew back and cupped her tear-ravaged face in his hands. "I can't bear to hear you apologize for what that bastard did to you. It was *not* your fault, do you hear me? I'm the one at fault. I should have told you a long time ago, Izzy. Huntley can't hurt me; he wouldn't dare go to my father. He defected to Cromwell during Charles' exile, selling Royalist secrets for money. If he breathes one single word to my father, I'll go to Charles with the information. I intended to tell him so."

Her eyes widened, and then, she drew a deep sigh of relief of all things. Ram stared into her eyes, trying to comprehend, waiting for

the anger she must feel when she realized she'd suffered for no reason.

"Do you mean it? I don't have to give him money, or let him do a-anything else when he c-comes to Cornwall?"

"Over my dead body," he growled. "Izzy, Paul was stricken with smallpox when I saw him at White Hall, but if he by chance survived I'm going to kill him for what he did to you. You need not fear him, ever again. He won't be coming to Cornwall. Ever." He waited, half expecting her to rise to Paul's defense.

She broke eye contact and stared at her lap. "But I agreed to what he did," she whispered brokenly.

His stomach twisted but he touched a finger to her chin. "I saw what you did to his face. That's not the response of a willing woman. Did you agree to let him tie you to his bed and take a switch to you?"

She shook her head. "Nay."

But she would have. She'd have agreed to anything Huntley demanded. Ram could read it on her face as clearly as if she'd said it aloud.

"It was my fault he ever learned what you did, Ram." She explained. "I couldn't have lived with myself if he'd ruined your relationship with your father. I couldn't bear it."

There was a moment of silence as Ram digested her vehement words, and then he cursed himself for a fool. He should have realized, given the circumstances with her own father, how sensitive she might be about the subject of fathers in general.

He stroked her cheek. "Instead you'd rather live with what he did to you? Because I can hardly bear it, I don't know how you can."

She shrugged. “I’ll heal.”

“Izzy,” he took her into his arms again and spoke carefully. “It takes longer to heal from the kind of ordeal you’ve been through than just the time it takes for these physical wounds to disappear. Rape causes other kinds of wounds, too.”

“Rape?” She pulled back wearing a small frown and shook her head in denial. “Nay, Ram. He didn’t rape me. He didn’t. I-I thought he intended to, b-but he was only toying with me,” her voice trailed off, her tone low and bitter. “He wanted only to scare me, and demean me.” She laughed without humor. He wanted to feel relief, but how could he, when he himself had deliberately demeaned her when last they were together? He hadn’t behaved any more honorably than Huntley had. ‘Twas arguable he’d actually acted with less honor than the other man. Self-disgust flooded him, along with the growing certainty that her life would be better off without him in it.

This wasn’t the time for dwelling on himself; not when she needed him. Doubt pricked at him as he concentrated on her claim. He’d seen her wounds firsthand and fresh. And if she believed she was protecting him he wouldn’t put it past her to lie, even now, under these circumstances. She was headstrong and brave and impossible sometimes, and he adored that about her. “Izzy, your thighs”-

She pressed her forehead against his chest. “T-that’s from the h-handle of the s-switch.” She shuddered.

He spit out a low curse. He hated that she’d been forced to learn such perversity existed in the way she had, at the expense of her innocence and trust. Even as vast relief overwhelmed him on one

hand, his rage grew apace on the other. How could anyone ever want to hurt a woman as innocent, sweet, and loyal as Izzy the way Huntley had? Ram remembered what Lucien had told him, about how Huntley had accosted Belinda, and an ugly truth became glaringly apparent. It was precisely that innocence and goodness that attracted Huntley. No doubt women of Louisa's ilk had ceased to satisfy his sick tastes long ago, for they enjoyed his painful games. Ram tightened his arms around Izzy and stroked her hair. Neither of the girls could be safe if Huntley survived his illness. Not only was the man broke and ruined, but now Izzy knew his sick secret and he'd lost his leverage over her. That would make him desperate.

But death by smallpox was too easy for the suffering the depraved monster had inflicted. Ram fervently hoped Paul recovered, for he'd take the great pleasure in killing the man in the slowest, most painful way he could devise, and without a single qualm. No one threatened or hurt the ones he cared about with impunity.

He realized Izzy had fallen asleep again. Ram held her for a long time, wondering where all of this left them. He still believed she'd be better off without him. Even if she didn't hold him to blame, none of this would have happened to her if not for him. But how could he walk away from her now? He didn't have that kind of strength, even if it was best for her. More than anything he wanted to be selfish, to keep her for himself, consequences be damned.

Nay! She deserved his selflessness. He'd do what was best for her, even if it turned out to be the worst thing ever to happen to him. He must. He laid her carefully against the pillow, then withdrew and

stood staring at her for a few minutes. His jaw set. There was one last thing he wanted to do for her.

He left her sleeping in the big bed and strode to the study.

***

When next she awoke, Izzy found herself alone. Outside the window, the sun had set and night was falling. Someone had lit beeswax tapers and in the flickering light the candles cast, she swept the room with a glance, knowing instantly Ram wasn't there. She felt his absence almost as keenly as his presence.

Where was he?

She stretched her aching body and struggled upright against the headboard. It was still hard to believe Ram wasn't angry with her over all that happened with Paul. His fury had been palpable, but incredibly, it wasn't directed at her.

She shuddered, imagining what Ram might do if Paul survived the Smallpox. She almost, *almost* felt sorry for Paul. But when she remembered the cruel things he said, and the pain, unlike any she'd known before, she found it difficult to extend compassion toward him. Paul deserved whatever happened to him.

There was a quick knock upon the chamber door and it opened before she could call out permission to enter. Ram strode in and her stomach twisted with both joy and apprehension. He didn't slide into bed with her again. Instead he settled in the chair next to the bed.

He looked so very tired. His eyes were red-rimmed and more than a day's worth of stubble covered his strong jaw. More than anything she wanted to touch him, but she was so afraid of rejection.

Instead she twisted her fingers in her lap and waited for him to speak.

"How are you?" he asked, softly.

She shrugged. "Better. Still tired."

"It will be a while yet before you recover your full strength."

She didn't want to discuss her health or anything else of little importance. She wanted to discuss *them*. She wanted to tell him she loved him again, the words were always there on the tip of her tongue, but how could she bear it if he didn't love her in return, if he answered the same way he had before, merely humoring her. In her dreams, when she was so sick, he'd said the words to her. Now, she wanted to hear him say them in truth. Where would she be if he didn't want her anymore?

Fear kept her silent. It went against everything she was to surrender to her fears, but what if she raised the issue only to learn he still wanted an annulment? At least, in this state of limbo, she hadn't yet lost him completely.

He was studying her. She quickly composed herself, not wanting him to even hint at her chaotic thoughts. His face softened and he took her hand.

"I have something for you," he murmured.

She gripped his hand back. "What is it?"

He produced a piece of parchment from his other hand and laid it on the bed. "Something you should have had a long time ago, sweetheart. Your father should have seen to it when he negotiated your marriage portion, but since he did not, it falls to me and I'm happy to do it."

Frowning, she reached for the document with her free hand, pushing away the hurt the mention of Papa caused. She unfolded the crisp page and scanned the contents. It was a deed. She looked up, met Ram's eyes. "I don't understand."

"It's the deed to the London townhouse. It's yours alone, for as long as you live."

"What! But…*why*?"

The lines around his mouth became more noticeable as his jaw tightened. "Because, Izzy, you deserve the security and you need it. You should *never* be forced to do something you don't wish to do out of desperation, because you have nowhere else to go. I saw the letter from your father, and frankly, it appalled me. Your choices shouldn't be limited by someone else's decisions. This is *your* life. I want you to have freedom and independence."

Anyone else would be elated by such a generous, thoughtful gift. Once upon a time it would have been the greatest gift she could ever hope to receive. It meant she would never be homeless, never subject to another's ultimatums. Yet now…now it represented something terrible, something she didn't even want to consider.

She didn't want to be free of him.

Tears filled her eyes and she bit her lip, desperately trying to rein in the hurt and the sadness. After all, she'd brought it on herself. And he was leaving her with more than she ever dreamed of. She would never be homeless. Even still, if she could have but one more chance… she rubbed her aching forehead with her fingertips. She would do everything so differently.

“Sweetheart? What’s amiss? I thought this would please you.”

“This is so generous Ram, but” she placed the deed on the bed and cleared her throat. Not knowing was killing her. What more could she lose? If he wasn’t hers to lose, she would know now. “But I don’t want to live in the townhouse without you. I don’t want to be free of you. I love you.”

A tear burned her cheek as it escaped from the corner of her eye.

Ram’s face softened. He leaned forward, brushed the tear away with a fingertip. “Sweetheart, we must face the hard truth. You’re better off without me and certainly safer. That’s what matters. I’ve done nothing but hurt you since our wedding day”-

“Nay! That isn’t true, not in the least. You’ve been kind and patient, while I acted like a spoiled child, and I’m so sorry, Ram. I only want a chance”-

He was shaking his head before she even finished her sentence. Sharp pain seized her. It was the ache in her chest she’d lived with since the night of their final confrontation, yet worse, far worse, because there was such finality in his voice. She looked at her hands twisted in her lap. They blurred as she stared dumbly. *I’ve lost him.*

“The risk is too great, sweetheart. I’m not what you need to be happy.”

For the first time since she realized she loved him, anger at him flared white hot. “Don’t you dare tell me what I need, not when you just stood here and told me I should have my independence to make my own decisions! What I *need* is you.” She jerked her head up to look

him in the eye. His face was ravaged, his eyes bleak, his nostrils pinched. “What I *want* is you! If you don’t love me, if you can’t stand the sight of me, then say so, tell me the truth, but don’t you dare stand there and hide behind fear as the reason for leaving me! That’s no reason at all!”

“That’s every reason, don’t you see? It’s the most important reason. I can’t bear to see you hurt, not on my account. It’s only because I love you so much that I will let you go, because I’ll do anything to protect you, to uphold the promises I made to you.”

Her heart cleaved in two as he turned his back and took two steps toward the door. He didn’t love her as he just now claimed, he couldn’t, or he wouldn’t be able to walk away, not like this. “You swore you’d never hurt me again,” she flung bitterly at his retreating back. He froze midstride but didn’t turn around. She dropped her head into her hands, unable to watch him go. “You made a promise to me you are about to break.”

“I did make that promise,” he said so softly she almost didn’t hear it. She raised her head to find that he’d turned around and stood staring at her.

“The pain Paul caused will be nothing compared to the pain I’ll suffer if you walk out that door” she whispered.

The expression on his face was so tender, her breath caught in her throat.

“I don’t know how to be happy without you. I don’t want to live without you,” she confessed into the void.

“I don’t want to live without you, either.”

She couldn't look away from the force of his stare. And then suddenly, Ram was on the bed and she was in his arms and he was kissing her with so much love, it snatched her breath and stole her senses. He ran his hands over her, down her arms, her back, her hair, then rose to cup her face, pulling back to look into her eyes as he did so.

"I love you, Izzy. My God, I love you more than life. I never want to be apart from you again."

"I'll never leave you again. I love you, Ram. I've loved you for so long and I'm sorry it took me so long to realize"-

He put a finger across her lips, silencing her. "No more apologies, my love. We leave all the bad in the past, tonight we start anew, tonight our marriage begins. Can you live with that?"

"Oh! There's nothing I want more!" She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tightly, scarce able to believe he was there, in her arms, that she hadn't lost him, hadn't lost her chance at happiness forever. "I love you," she whispered, over and over against his hair.

He held her as if he'd never let her go.

***

A long while later Ram finally drew back from their embrace. He dragged his lips across her forehead. "You must rest now, Izzy. I'm a bastard to upset you while you're so very ill and I'm sorry. You're still quite weak and I'll not allow you to relapse on my watch."

"You said no more apologies. I'll not listen to you break the rules so quickly!

Take it back!”

He laughed, then heaved a sigh filled with exaggerated exasperation. “You’re a demanding wench for one so sick, you know.”

“Ramsay!” A thought occurred. “Do I have smallpox, then? Am I horribly disfigured?”

“Nay, love. Believe it or not, you had a dreadful bout of Influenza. Caught, no doubt, from Meg, who is even now confined to bed. We shall have her horsewhipped posthaste.”

She giggled. It seemed so long since she’d been the recipient of Ram’s tender teasing. “Only influenza?” she whispered. But as she did she realized how lucky she had been to escape smallpox. “But I went to court…”

Ram’s face grew serious. “We shall have to keep a vigilant eye on you to make sure you still do not come down with the contagion. But this was most definitely not it.” He grew thoughtful. “Those who are sick now, were exposed within the past fortnight. Like Louisa, who had been serving as one of the Princess Royal’s attendants. As you were in court within that time and in the presence of those who were infected, you may have been exposed as well.”

It didn’t bear thinking upon. If she fell ill with Smallpox on the heels of influenza, her chance of surviving was slim. Surely God wouldn’t give her this wonderful gift of love, only to snatch her away before a lifetime spent with this man. She refused to believe it.

“Will you rest?” Ram asked, stroking a hand down her hair.

She’d do anything he ever asked of her. Of course, there was no reason to tell him that and give him ideas.

“What’s amusing you?”

She bit her tongue. “Nothing. Will you stay with me?”

He studied her face closely, as if trying to read her mind. “I dare you to try and get rid of me.”

She was still smiling when she drifted off to a peaceful sleep.

***

When she awoke again, Ram was laying at her side, propped on one elbow, studying her. The corners of his mouth lifted and he leaned down, brushed his lips across hers. “I missed you,” he murmured.

Her heart leapt with gladness at his confession. He didn’t just mean while she’d slept. “I missed you, too. So very much.”

He kissed the tip of her nose. “Stubborn little nose. I should have known what I was in for from the beginning just from that.”

She laughed at the silliness of it, choosing to take it as a compliment rather than complaint.

“Will you take more soup?”

She nodded and let him help her into a sitting position. He lifted a bowl from the covered tray she hadn’t even noticed sitting on the bedside table. “You make an exceptional nurse, my lord,” she teased as she took the bowl from him. He smiled.

When the soup was nearly gone, Ram cleared his throat. “There’s no good way to ease into this, so I’ll just say it. I heard from Dexter while you were sleeping, Izzy. He sent a messenger. I asked him to keep me apprised of the tidings from court.” He cleared his throat again. “Paul didn’t survive, Izzy. I’m sorry, for your sake, since

you once cared for him."

She pushed her hair back from her face, trying to think of the right words to express her feelings adequately. Her initial moment of sadness was for a man who'd never existed and the somber mood was quickly extinguished. "I'm not. He was a wretched man, happy to use people who cared about him to achieve his own ends. I'm only sorry I didn't listen to those wiser than I and saved us both much heartache."

"Ah, Izzy. Your tenacity is one of the things I love most about you."

She giggled. "You won't be saying that in ten years!"

"I fully expect to be repeating these same words to you in a decade."

"Will you still roll your eyes when you say them?"

He grinned. "Most likely."

She traced his lips with her finger. "I don't deserve you, Ram. You are such a wonderful man." She pressed a kiss against his lips. His arms tightened around her. He took the fingers that had traced his lips and gently kissed each fingertip in turn. "Forgive me, Sweetheart."

She frowned in confusion. "For what?"

"For the last time we were together. I was a brute to treat you as I did."

"No more apologies, Ram."

"Izzy, I need to say this. I need your forgiveness for this."

"Then I forgive you, especially since there's nothing to forgive. I deserved your treatment, and probably so much more. And truly, I did not learn what it meant to whore one's self until Paul.

The tension that coiled within him immediately transferred itself to her. “You didn’t deserve what I subjected you to, and for that I’m sorry. And I’m sorrier still I wasn’t in time to stop what happened to you.”

She stroked his cheek. “Thank you for saying that. And now we really shall leave the past behind us. If we start trading apologies now, we’ll never get out of this bed.”

He wrapped her in his arms. “I could think of worse ways to spend my life.”

With a laugh she snuggled closer. His arms tightened around her, cocooning her in his warmth and affection. They lay in comfortable silence for some time. She was drowsing in his arms, relishing their reconciliation, delighting in finally reclaiming the feelings they’d held for one another before their marriage, when a thought occurred to her, brought on by the memory of their wedding day and the surroundings of the chamber where they’d spent their first nights as a married couple.

“Ram?”

“Yes, my love?”

His endearment thrilled her to the core. “Would you think me insane if I asked for us to be married again, to have a second wedding? A new wedding for a new beginning? We needn’t have a pastor, only a small gathering of those important to us. Our first wedding day was horrid, for both of us, I think I know it sounds ridiculous and people will wonder for my sanity-”

“Nay, they’ll think you expect a second wedding gift from

them."

She laughed. "I'm serious, Ram. I'd like to celebrate our love before the world…although if anyone feels the need to bring a second gift, I wouldn't stop them."

His eyes crinkled, and adoration shined from the gray depths. "I love the idea of marrying you again. I'll wed you a hundred times if you but ask it. And I'll gift you with a wedding present every morning of your life, if that makes you happy. But you've many more days of bed rest ahead of you. We can discuss this when you are fully recovered."

She pouted for an instant then decided to focus her thoughts on something else he'd said. "Will you be spending many of these bed rest days here beside me?"

"Didn't I already dare you to try and remove me?"

She smiled, overcome with love. "Then I'll be more than content to confine myself to your bed, my lord."

He kissed her, soft and sweet.

Suddenly the bedroom door flung open without warning. A distressed Hawthorne stood in the hallway wringing his hands, watching in horror as Izzy's mother and a subdued Belinda and Lucien all filed into the chamber, blatantly invading their privacy.

Mama walked straight to the bed, just as Ram slid out of it. She examined Izzy from head to toe. "My God, Belinda said it might be smallpox."

"Influenza, Mama. Only influenza."

Her relief apparent, Mama's sudden smile lit the room. "You're

pale, but ‘tis obvious you’re regaining your strength already. What can I do for you?” She turned to Ram, who’d retaken his seat in the chair by the bed. “You must be exhausted. I’ll be happy to watch over her for a spell.”

“Mama, I’m fine. Ram took good care of me through my illness.”

Ram looked sheepish as he addressed her mother. “I helped, of course, but you know Izzy’s will is strong, and she was determined to get well.”

Her mother ran a cool hand across her forehead. “You should be resting.”

“I know, Mama. But Ram and I are making plans to renew our wedding vows.”

“What a wonderful idea, darling” she looked knowingly from Ram and Izzy. “Dare I say this arranged marriage turned out to be a success in the end?”

Izzy reach for Ram’s hand. “Indeed it has.”

“You see, Belinda, an arranged marriage can work quite well.”

When Belinda remained silent, Izzy glanced at her, confused. Her mother turned back to Izzy. “Have you had the pleasure of meeting Belinda’s betrothed yet?”

“Betrothed?” Both Izzy and Ram asked in unison

“Lord Lucien De Vere is to marry our Belinda in three months time. I understand you’re a very good friend, Ramsay?”

Ram nodded dumbly as they both absorbed the news. *Belinda and Lucien?*

How had so much happened during the time she'd been ill?

Izzy studied the newly betrothed couple, but if something was amiss, they weren't letting on. She must talk to Belinda alone and get the details!

And then she saw Papa, hanging back by the door, watching her with concern. Her stomach clenched at the sight of him. She had missed him, and not just his physical presence. She missed the close bond they'd once shared.

"Papa?"

He looked uncomfortable. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Papa, may we speak alone?"

"Aye, of course." He answered gruffly. The other inhabitants of the chamber excused themselves immediately.

When they were alone, Papa moved closer, taking a seat gingerly beside her on the bed. "Are you certain you're well?"

"Aye, Papa. Everything is well. My health is improving, and I couldn't be happier with my marriage." She took a deep breath. "Please let me apologize for what happened in your study on my wedding day. I can't bear for us to be at odds anymore."

He held up a hand to halt her. "There's no need to discuss what happened. 'Tis in the past."

She took a deep breath, needing to apologize anyway. But this was such a delicate subject. "But papa- I lied to you that day, and I'm so sorry." Heat crept across her face. "I told you I'd given my virginity away, but really I only said it to make you call off the wedding. I see now you only had my best interests at heart in regards to Paul, and I

should have known you'd never marry me off to a terrible man."

"Ah, Izzy. I am sorry I forced you to it, though. We needed the funds, 'tis the truth, but I should have let you follow your own heart. I didn't realize, until I believed we might truly lose you."

She reached out and clasped his hand with hers and shuddered in relief. He squeezed her fingers. "But you did, Papa, you did let me follow my heart. I met a man before my wedding, and I fell in love with him. He told me his name was Julian. He only neglected to tell me his full name was Ramsay Julian James Maitland. So you see, Papa, I would have chosen Ram no matter what."

His eyes looked suspiciously moist. "Is that the truth?"

Tears formed in her eyes too. She'd never seen her father shed a tear. Not when Cromwell executed his friend and monarch, nor when they'd had to leave their beloved home, or through the long years of exile. "'Tis the honest truth. The rogue tricked me, but by the time I discovered the truth, I already loved him." She held his hand tighter. "Oh Papa. I love you."

He leaned down and wrapped his arms around her in a great bear hug, as he'd done when she was a child. "I love you too, daughter."

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Ram sank exhausted into a chair in his father's study. Lucien took the seat across the desk after retrieving a decanter and two tumblers. He filled one and handed it to Ram, who took it gratefully. Lucien wore a thoughtful expression, so Ram leaned back in his chair, content to wait until his friend was ready to talk.

He thought of Izzy, of how close he'd come to losing her, both from illness and sheer foolishness, and he shuddered. How had he talked himself into believing he could ever let her go? Thank God and all his saints she was stubborn and clever and had used the promise he'd made on their wedding night against him.

He was immensely glad he'd let her, for he'd been wrong. He wasn't better off without her and she wasn't better off without him. Since his will had crumbled and he'd vowed his love, the Izzy he adored had returned. She was vivacious and alive and utterly appealing even in her sickbed. She was the girl he'd known at the crofter's cottage and everything was finally as it was meant to be. Now, with all of the horrors behind them, he could focus his attention on loving her for the rest of his life.

He warmed with the knowledge he would see her every night before he went to sleep and every morning when he woke, and countless moments in between. He missed her now, and he'd scarcely been away from her for quarter of an hour. It was foolish and unreasonable and he'd never been so happy.

He studied Lucien surreptitiously. Had he ever felt like that about a woman? Did he feel that way about Belinda? Izzy's cousin was a lovely girl, but Ram couldn't imagine her inspiring wild passion in a man, but love was strange that way. If Lucien felt even a portion of what he felt for Izzy, he and Belinda would do very well together, indeed. Ram had to admit that for a man who'd always proclaimed he'd remain a bachelor in perpetuity, he looked remarkably calm in the face of his newly announced betrothal. What the hell had

happened, anyway?

"Lucien?"

"Oh, bloody hell. Let's get the interrogation over with already!"

Ram fought to hide a grin. "Care to tell me what changed since I last saw you? Usually when a betrothal happens this fast it's because two young lovers have been caught doing something they shouldn't have done. Is there anything you'd like to share?" A grin escaped despite his best attempts. "Miss Spencer is now my relative by marriage. That means I have the right to beat the hell out of you if you ever behave dishonorably toward her."

"You can try." Lucien grinned and then sighed. "And aye, you have the right of it. Izzy's parents found us in somewhat awkward circumstances."

Ram couldn't choke back a laugh of disbelief. . How fascinating. "You were caught with *Miss Spencer*?" Perhaps Izzy's shy cousin had a side to her only one special man would ever know.

"I'd appreciate if you didn't refer to my betrothed in that tone."

Ram poured himself another drink, relishing the burn of the liquor as it slid down his throat. "Why don't you explain exactly what happened, rather than have me drag it out of you, bit by bit."

"It's your bloody fault, you know. It was your suggestion I escort her here in my carriage."

"If you decided to debauch her in a carriage, certainly you were smart enough to have drawn the curtains tightly, were you not?"

"Nay, it wasn't anything like that. Inclement weather forced us to stop at a very crowded inn. And of course there was only one room

to let and barely enough room in the stable for my driver. Belinda was to take the bed and I was to sleep on the floor. In the most unfortunate of coincidences, Izzy's parents stopped at the inn before us for the same reason and were in the eating room when we arrived. They saw us go upstairs together." He took a sip of his drink. "When they came to the room, I was wearing naught but my breeches and Belinda, though wrapped in a blanket, wore nothing but her chemise." Before Ram could even ask, Lucien continued. "We got soaked on the dash inside. We had to get out of our garments to let them dry. But the damage was done and needless to say, your father-in-law was none too pleased at the circumstance. The betrothal was decided upon in a matter of minutes."

This, then, was not a good thing. If passion hadn't caused the betrothal it was better for Lucien to back out now. If honor forced Lucien into a marriage he didn't want he'd be miserable, and likely he'd make Belinda miserable too. "Then she wasn't truly compromised, was she? Lucien, Beaumont is an honorable enough man. Offer to fund Belinda's dowry, for I know her parents didn't leave her anything, and as long as no one else was privy to the events at the inn…" He lost his train of thought when Lucien flushed. Bloody hell. When was the last time *that* happened? "You said nothing occurred at the inn?"

"Nay, nothing happened. At the inn."

Ram stared in thought until understanding at Lucien's discomfort dawned. "You couldn't keep your hands off the girl in the carriage?"

Lucien's face turned an even deeper shade of red. Ram was flabbergasted. "She's not even the sort of woman you usually even fancy! Bloody hell, Lucien, what were you thinking? Might she be with child?"

Lucien's gaze slammed to his, eyes wide with indignation. "Nay!" He blew out a breath. "If I'd gone that far in the carriage why would I deny myself at the inn?"

A valid point. Ram sighed in relief. "At least you still have *some* honor left." He sloshed the remaining contents of his drink around in the tumbler. "I assume Beaumont knows nothing of what occurred in the carriage. You could still find a way out."

"Hell, Ram. I'm nine and twenty years of age. It's about time I think about a wife and a family anyway, don't you agree?"

Ram sat back, dumbfounded. "You *want* to marry her? Are we referring to the same woman? Belinda Spencer? The timid one, with, and I quote directly from a libertine at court who has quite the reputation with the ladies, "no fire?"

"Would you stop saying her name like that?" Lucien snapped through gritted teeth. "There's nothing in the least objectionable about the woman." Ram stared at him as Lucien muttered something that sounded like, "she has more fire than any woman ought ever have."

Nay, there wasn't anything objectionable about Belinda at all. She was quite lovely, in fact, and Ram was very fond of her. But he couldn't help but compare her to Izzy. Belinda lacked the vivaciousness and stubborn streak that charmed him so in her cousin.

But perhaps a wife like Belinda would be best for Lucien. He needed a wife that wouldn't lead him a merry chase the way Izzy did with him. The man was already spooked enough by the idea of marriage, a gentle woman would be better.

He stood and went to Lucien's side, clapping his shoulder in a tight grip. "Congratulations, Lucien. I do believe there's no woman better suited for you than Belinda Spencer. And with your marriage, we'll be family. Cousins by marriage."

Lucien smiled and raised his glass in a mock salute. "If you repeat this to anyone, I'll deny it. But seeing what you share with Izzy, though trying at times, has made me realize that what I lack in life might be exactly what I need the most. I hope I find that sort of affection with Belinda. I'm already quite fond of her and marriages have begun on far less."

If Lucien was willing to marry the woman, he must already have strong feelings for her, beyond mere fondness. Ram smiled, conjuring an image of the innocent vixen waiting for him upstairs. "I pray you find it too, my friend, for what I have with Izzy is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

***

Izzy picked at a string coming loose from her coverlet. Papa had left her alone over an hour ago and neither Ram nor Belinda had returned since. She was going mad with the need to question Belinda and find out how she'd gone from barely knowing Lucien only a few days ago, to becoming his betrothed today.

She was moments away from climbing out of bed to look for

Belinda herself, even at the risk of a scolding from Ram, when the door opened and Belinda peeked her head in.

"Izzy! Don't you dare get out of bed! What do you need? I'll be happy to get it for you." Her cousin bustled over to the bedside. Izzy's hand snaked out and grasped Belinda's arm, pulling her down into the chair beside the bed.

"I need to talk to you! I was going downstairs to find you. What on Earth happened, Bel? How did you come to be betrothed to Lucien? And so quickly? Were you keeping your courtship secret from me?"

"Oh! 'Twas nothing like that, Izzy." Belinda winced. "The circumstances are quite mortifying, actually. Your parents found us sharing a room together in an inn."

Izzy's mouth dropped open. "You?"

"Aye, me. There's no need to look so surprised. It certainly wasn't as sordid as it sounds." She settled back against the chair Ram had used to keep his vigil. "Lucien was escorting me here in his carriage because Ram decided to come by mount. And lucky for you he did, too. Did the two of you finally put everything to right?"

Izzy ducked her head and nodded. "Aye, everything is perfect."

"I'm happy for you." Belinda said softly.

"I'm happy too. But you're not distracting me so easily as that! What happened at that inn? Why were you even there?"

"We had to stop because the rain made the roads impassable. We suffered a drenching on the dash from the carriage to the inn. On top of that, we were forced to share the last room for let. Every

traveler found their way to that inn that night it seemed. Of course Lucien was a perfect gentleman and had every intention of sleeping on the floor, giving me the bed. Nothing inappropriate occurred."

Izzy caught her cousin's wistful sigh. "But you wanted it to!" She was shocked. This was so unlike the usually staid and levelheaded Belinda she knew.

When her cousin blushed, Izzy knew her guess was correct. "My parents saw you at the inn? In your room?" She didn't wait for a response, having already pieced together what happened after Papa discovered them alone together.

"Why didn't you tell me you had feelings for Lucien? I thought you hardly knew one another."

"We didn't! But at court he saved me from an advance from an unwelcome suitor. And then as payment he demanded a kiss. I thought him loathsome. Well, not really, but I let him believe I did. And then the next day he apologized, and he was so gallant and helpful…" her voice trailed off and Izzy stared in amazement. Belinda was *babbling*!

"You kissed him at court! What was that like?" Izzy had been so involved with her own misery she'd missed an important event in her best friend's life. Belinda averted her gaze. "It was a short kiss."

"He kissed you again, didn't he?" Izzy leaned over the edge of the bed, grabbing Belinda's hand and pulling it toward her until her cousin had no choice but to look at her. "If you know the difference between a long and short kiss…"

“In the carriage,” she whispered.

“And?” Izzy prompted.

“It’s not at all seemly for me to discuss this with you, Izzy.”

“Of course it is. I’m a married woman for heaven’s sake.” Rolling her eyes, she squeezed Belinda’s hand.

“Oh Izzy, it was so wonderful. I felt the most amazing sensations!”

“Like you were burning hot and tingly all over?”

“Aye! Precisely that! How did you know?”

Izzy laughed. “Oh, Belinda. ‘Tis the way I feel whenever Ram kisses me.”

“Truly?”

“Truly. You’re so lucky to marry a man who makes you feel that way. Are you happy, Belinda?”

“I was unhappy when he stopped kissing me. I thought he didn’t want me.”

“You silly goose, he was trying to be honorable. Would you want to lose your virginity in a carriage?”

Belinda’s cheeks grew pinker. “Nay. You’re right, of course. I accused him of not wanting me, but now that I think on it, I believe he was trying to be honorable.” A smile spread across her face.

“I’m so happy for you. You’ve so many wonderful things yet to discover.”

“Will you tell me what it will be like?”

Izzy regarded her cousin for a moment, wondering what to say. Her own initiation into the love act had been both eye-opening and

shocking, but there would be no misunderstandings between Belinda and Lucien when their time came. “I think not. I believe it will please Lucien greatly to teach you these things himself.” She couldn’t help but laugh at Belinda’s crestfallen expression. “But Belinda? I look forward to each and every night I go to bed with Ram, and I have a feeling it shall be the same for you with Lucien!”

***

*Two weeks later…*

Izzy stifled a scream. She was tired of being stuck in bed like an invalid. Though she appreciated the love of her family and accepted their pampering and catering, if she didn’t look at something other than the four walls of the bedchamber soon, she’d go insane. Her strength returned a little more each day, and it looked likely she’d not be stricken with smallpox. She was weary of planning her renewal vows and Belinda’s wedding from the confines of bed. She longed to be outdoors, to feel the sun on her face and the wind in her hair.

Grumbling, she slipped from the bed to steal to the wardrobe and put on a gown to join the company of the living downstairs. Just as she was rummaging about for something to wear, a pair of hands wrapped around her waist and hoisted her into the air. She squealed in surprise, which turned to pleasure when she found herself held firmly in Ram’s arms, cradled against his broad chest. She slipped her arms around his neck.

“What are you doing out of that bed?” he demanded, his eyebrows drawn together in a mock scowl.

“Oh, Ram. To continue insisting I remain cooped up in here is silly. I’m healthy as a horse. And I’m sick and tired of being abed.” She tightened her arms and raked her fingers through the hair at his nape. “Couldn’t we negotiate my return to the real world?”

His eyes kindled when she circled his ear lightly with her fingertips, then toyed with the soft skin of his lobe. “What did you have in mind, wife?”

“I thought perhaps a demonstration of my stamina might persuade you I’m well on the road to full recovery.” They hadn’t been intimate since their return to Cornwall, and Izzy yearned for him.

“Stop looking at me like that!”

“Like what?” she pouted.

“Like I’m some edible sweet you can’t wait to put into your mouth.”

His words sent a heavy surge of desire ricocheting through her body; a hollow, exquisite ache settled low in her belly. “Maybe I can’t wait to have you in my mouth.” she breathed.

He groaned. “You’re not playing fair.”

“Mmm. You knew when you married me I don’t play fair.”

His lips quirked in a rueful grin. “True enough.”

“Ram?”

“Aye, love?”

“Make love to me?”

He paused for the span of a heartbeat. “But you’ve been so ill…”

“I’m not ill any longer.” Twining her arms tighter about his

neck, she raised her mouth to his. “Let me prove it.”

When she kissed him, his response was hesitant at first, but within moments a fire of need consumed them, and Ram’s insistent mouth became hard and demanding, urging a response from her with his lips and tongue.

Still holding her in his arms, he strode to the bed, laying her upon it, following her down. She reveled in the feel of his hard body pressing her into the soft down of the mattress and arched her body up against his. He growled in response.

Her frenzied fingers tore at his shirt, wanting to feel the heat of his skin beneath her touch. His hands speared into her hair, anchoring her head in place as he plundered her mouth. She moaned low in her throat, her need for him like a thirst that had to be quenched. He responded by deepening the kiss, his tongue sliding wetly against hers, his breath becoming her breath as they strained against one another. He nipped at her lips, her chin, her neck as he moved down the bed. His hands left her hair to reach for the hem of her night rail and he tore it from her, baring her to his hungry gaze. She flushed with pleasure and excitement.

He stared down at her. “God, Izzy. You’re so beautiful.” His warm hands slid down her sides, outlining her waist and then her hips.

She arched up off the bed and reached for him.

He shed his breeches, then returned, lowering himself between her thighs. As she spread her hands across the sleek muscles of his back, desire tightened into a taut coil deep within her belly. She drew

her hands over his shoulders, tracing the corded muscles of his neck and collar, then trailed her fingers across his chest, over his oval nipples, and lower still, until she grasped his hot shaft with one hand. She stroked him, long and hard, then slow and soft, until his harsh panting echoed in her ears, the sound like an aphrodisiac to her starved senses.

He groaned, then lowered his head and drew her nipple into his mouth. She cried out at the sensation of fiery tongue against sensitive breast. He slid one hand between her thighs and stroked her slick flesh, groaning when he found her already damp for him.

"So wet…so good," he rasped, using the pads of his fingers to spread her own hot moisture over her aching skin. "You drive me insane, Izzy."

She tossed her head and gripped his buttocks tightly, urging him closer, begging him through touch for what she needed.

When he lifted his head their eyes met and held Izzy understood immediately what he was feeling, for she experienced it too. They stood at a precipice, ready to topple over the edge together. Never before had they made love for the sole purpose of becoming one. Not even in those early halcyon days in the crofter's cottage had they shared their bodies without an ulterior motive of some sort, without lies and deceit between them.

She shifted against him in blatant invitation and he surged forward, plunging into her with one hard thrust of his hips. She cried out with utter fulfillment at their joining. She needed this, needed him, so much. His hands sought hers and brought them up on either

side of her head, entwining his fingers within hers. And then he began to move, never taking his eyes from hers.

Shudders of intense pleasure wracked her as he withdrew then thrust deep, over and over, breaching every defense she'd ever erected to join with her in the most profound way possible. She wrapped her legs about his waist, pulling him deeper still while the tension in her belly continued to tighten and his body urged hers on to release.

Her body sang at his possession, and she began to cry out, low moans that turned into soft cries of ecstasy as he rode her closer and closer to the edge of climax. When she couldn't bear the unrelenting pleasure any longer, he sped his movements and she tumbled into oblivion, gasping as her body exploded in bliss. As she trembled and shuddered around him he took her face between his hands, looked into her eyes, and found his own release. A harsh cry burst from him and he pulsed inside her, again and again. For a moment they remained frozen, locked together, staring into one another's eyes, until he lowered his head into the crook of her neck, breathing heavily, breaking the magical spell that danced and flitted around them.

Izzy was overcome. Never before had it been like this between them. Nothing she'd experienced came close to the magnitude and intensity of what they'd just shared. It wasn't possible feel as close to another soul as she felt to Ram. Clenching her arms around his neck, she embraced him, fighting tears of profound joy. When he lifted his head to look at her, his eyes were liquid stone. He'd experienced the same magic.

"I love you." she whispered.

His eyes briefly closed and he pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. “And I, you, my love.”

# Epilogue

*Eight weeks later…*

Chesworth house was beautifully decorated for the celebration that followed the renewal of their wedding vows. This time there was no fear, no deceit, no trepidation as Izzy stood before Ram and promised to love and cherish him for the rest of her days.

His eyes were warm as he repeated the same vows, then twinkled when he threw in an additional vow to always be patient with her, which caused laughter amongst the small number of assembled guests. Laughter turned to sighs when Ram took her into his arms and kissed her long and slow, demonstrating his love for her before the world.

Shortly afterward, while Ram shared a drink with his friends, Izzy managed to get her cousin alone. “Just imagine. In only another few weeks you’ll be standing here, repeating the very same words to Lucien.” Belinda smiled, her eyes automatically seeking out her betrothed, and Izzy thrilled to see the love that shone in Bel’s blue gaze. Izzy snuck a peek in Lucien’s direction, content when she caught the gentle smile he sent back to Belinda. She adored the man who made Belinda look so very happy.

She’d always thought Belinda pretty, but Belinda in love was beautiful, and wasn’t it just too bad for all the gentleman who’d never noticed until now, when it was too late? Lucien was a prince amongst

men with exquisite taste and a wholly undeserved reputation as a libertine as far as Izzy was concerned.

For propriety's sake, Izzy's mother had not let Belinda and Lucien be alone for more than a few minutes at a time. Izzy knew Belinda ached to spend a few moments in the arms of her beloved. Izzy was so incredibly happy with her own life she wanted everyone she loved to be just as content. Gaining Belinda's attention, she whispered into her ear. "When Ram and I retire for the evening, use the distraction to take Lucien out to the gardens."

Belinda's eyes lit up at the suggestion, and Izzy laughed at her obvious eagerness. Somehow they'd both become slaves to the men they adored and it was marvelous. "Who would have thought mere months ago that either of us would end up here?"

Belinda smiled. "I suppose I was wrong. Picking a random man to give your virginity to turned out to be just the perfect solution to your marital dilemma."

They both dissolved into laughter at the reminder of what had started them on this journey.

Strong arms encircled Izzy's waist from behind and she leaned against Ram's chest without hesitation, trusting him to support her, loving how the strong muscles at her back cocooned her with safety.

"What's so funny?" he murmured in her ear.

"Just women talk. Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Mmm. Doubtful, but it's probably best if I don't know." He nuzzled her neck. "Does a renewal of vows entail a second wedding night? I believe I have much to make up for from the first."

Izzy sent an amused look in Belinda's direction, whose cheeks had turned pink, even as she pretended not to hear the exchange.

"I believe it does, my lord. Shall we bid our guests good evening?"

"I can't think of anything I'd like more. At least not anything appropriate for this kind of gathering," he lowered his voice to the intimate tone that thrilled her. "That will have to wait a while longer, I fear."

Izzy pressed a kiss to his cheek, then darted a look at Belinda, imparting her silent message with a glance. Understanding immediately, Belinda disappeared into the crowd without a word of farewell.

"And just where is Belinda hotfooting it off to?"

Izzy turned an innocent look on her husband. "I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"Keeping secrets now, wife? I'm sure you do know."

"Well…" she drawled, thinking about the biggest secret she had yet to share with him. That would come later this evening. "If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say she plans to use the coming distraction to find a few stolen moments with your friend."

"Troublemaker." He laughed, and, understanding her intent, took her hand and lead her off to make a spectacle of their departure.

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It was almost another hour until Ram carried Izzy over the threshold of their chamber. She hoped Belinda utilized her time with Lucien wisely, because now Izzy's thoughts were securely focused

upon her husband and would be until morning arrived. At the earliest.

She turned the key in the lock, then walked a direct path to Ram, pulling pins from her hair as she went. When her curls tumbled down her back she carefully removed the garland that sat upon her head like a crown.

"I can't believe you got this for me," she exclaimed for at least the tenth time, carefully laying the pretty adornment on the vanity where it would remain safe. It was nearly identical to the one he'd bought her during the May Day festival.

"I know how much you regret losing the first one."

"I didn't realize you were such a romantic at heart."

He grinned. "Would you rather I'd given you your white mob cap to wear today instead? I warrant it wouldn't have been nearly as pretty."

Eyes wide with surprise, she spun to face him. "You jest. Surely you didn't keep my cap!"

"Surely I did."

"But…but why?" she spluttered.

Grasping her by the hand, he tugged her closer. "Because even back on May Day I sensed our meeting was momentous. I'll always be grateful for that cap. Without it we might never have met that day at the river. I'm quite fond of it."

She marveled over how easily he surprised her with simple proof of his love. She warmed. How she adored him. Outwardly, she only rolled her eyes and exclaimed, "you're insane."

"Only for you." He drew her into his arms and in moments she

stood before him in only her chemise. She glanced at the bed with longing and he laughed before seating himself upon it, pulling her to stand between his thighs. Her fingers immediately went to work divesting him of his formal attire.

"I've something for you first, love."

"Mmm?" She pushed his doublet off his broad shoulders. As she lifted his shirt, he leaned around her to the bedside table and lifted a box she hadn't noticed before. He waited until she'd flung the garment to the floor, then presented the box to her with aplomb.

"What's this?"

"A true gift. A new wedding present for a new beginning."

Unlike the first time Ram gifted her with a wedding present, this time Izzy squealed with glee and leapt onto her knees on the bed, holding out her hand. Ram chuckled and held the box just out of her reach. After one failed attempt at claiming it, she dove at him and tickled him under his upraised arm.

"Pax!" He exclaimed, laughing. "You don't play fair!"

"How many times must I tell you I'll never play fair? Besides, since I've always been shorter than nearly everyone I know, as a child I learned to adapt. With three older brothers it's survive or perish."

He grinned. "I like you small. It makes it easier to do this," he grabbed her by the waist and flipped her to her back, then descended upon her, tickling her mercilessly at her ribs. She shrieked and tried to wiggle out from under him but he held fast. Finally, with tears of mirth in her eyes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, effectively putting an end to his shenanigans. She took his lower

lip into her mouth and sucked gently while she ran her fingers through his hair, losing herself in his taste. With a grunt he tightened his arms around her and deepened the kiss until she was panting.

After a few minutes of drugging kisses he lifted his mouth a few inches from hers. “Don’t you want your gift?”

“What gift?” she sighed.

With a laugh he sat, taking her with him. He put the pretty white box in her hand.

She gasped with pleasure when she opened it and saw the beautiful pair of ruby and diamond bracelets lying on a bed of dark blue velvet.

“They’re divine.” She whispered. She lifted one and studied it. The bracelet was truly exquisite. “I adore them.”

“If you please me, Wife, I might be willing to part with the matching necklace and earrings.”

“I can rise to that challenge.” She gave him a coy glance. “The question is, can you?”

He returned her look with a lewd one of his own. “You’ll have to work long and hard,” he warned.

“Mm. Long and hard. My favorite.”

His hands settled at her waist and he pulled her closer. “My wife is wicked and wanton, and I love it. I’m the luckiest man alive.” He took her earlobe between his lips and nuzzled her.

She laughed and touched his cheek. “Before you show me how much you appreciate me, I’ve a gift for you, too.”

“Do you?” He released her ear and leaned back upon the bed,

resting his weight on his elbows once more. She gazed hungrily at the taut muscles of his chest, laid out before her like a feast for the eyes. “Aren’t you going to get me your gift, Izzy, before we move on to what you so clearly have on your mind?” he asked in tone suffused with amusement.

“Nay.”

He frowned. One eyebrow lifted as he waited for her to elaborate.

“Your gift is not yet finished.”

“You had weeks in which to plan!” he pointed out with an indignant laugh.

“Even so, you must be patient.” She shrugged innocently. “I won’t be able to present my gift to you for another seven months, give or take a few days.”

She held her breath, waiting for realization to dawn.

He made an inarticulate sound and bolted upright. His eyes snapped to hers, darted to her still-flat belly, and back to hold her gaze. “Are you...Are we… Will there be a babe?”

She nodded, releasing her breath and laughing in delight as he whooped with happiness, coming off the mattress to lift her into his arms. He placed her on the bed with the greatest of care, then shed his breeches and lay beside her, taking her hand in his.

“Izzy, my love, I can honestly say you’ve made me the happiest man in the world.”

“Surely there’s something else I can do for you since I can’t give you your gift tonight?” She pushed him to his back and covered his

body with hers. She began to shimmy her way down his chest, intent on pleasuring him in a way she hadn't done in so long, but had fantasized about for days.

Much to her annoyance he hauled her up against his chest before she reached her destination, so they were face to face. "I never did ask where you learned that particular trick. It was the memory of your skill that convinced me, more than any words you uttered to your father in the study the day of our wedding, that you were no innocent."

She blushed. "A woman should be allowed to have some secrets of her own, my lord."

"Isabelle"- his voice oozed warning.

"You are never to call me Isabelle again. I should have had *that* added into your vows."

"I can't guarantee that in moments of extreme exasperation I might not be able to help myself." He grinned wickedly.

"Very well then," she heaved a sigh. "I received a lesson."

His fingers tightened around her arms and though she maintained a calm façade, she thrilled in his possessive grip.

"A lesson? From whom?" His eyebrows drew together as he turned a fierce frown upon her.

"Do you know Maura of Egloshayle?" At his surprised look, she smirked. "Of course you do. Every male who grew up in these parts knew her when they were young men."

He had the good grace to look sheepish.

"I paid her for advice when it became apparent that *Julian*

wasn't going to cooperate in the taking of my virginity."

Utter shock blazed from his eyes. "Izzy! You went to a *prostitute* for instruction?"

She nodded and clasped her hands primly across his chest.

At his sudden bark of laughter her gaze flew to his face. And then he was overcome, laughing so hard tears rose in his eyes. He pulled her against him, holding her tight. "You are incorrigible!" he gasped.

"I shall take that as a compliment," she rolled her eyes when he only laughed harder. "I didn't know what else to do! She gave me a lesson and guaranteed it foolproof to entice Julian to make love to me. Apparently, I was fool enough to ruin something foolproof. I failed terribly and would like another attempt."

His laughter turned to loud guffaws. "Sweetheart, you didn't fail, not in any sense of the word, but if the outcome wasn't what you desired, it was only because you were *too* good at it." He continued chuckling when she glowered in mock indignation. "*Julian* was a fool. He should have taken your virginity and never looked back." Ram pressed a kiss to her forehead. His lips wandered over her hair. "Did Maura teach you any other "tricks?" he whispered huskily against her ear.

A shiver coursed through her and liquid heat pooled between her legs. Desire flared, hot and potent.

"She may have," Izzy replied saucily.

"Then as your husband I demand you tell me all the secrets you learned. Remember, you vowed not once, but twice to obey me."

She slid down the bed again, toward the part of him that fascinated her most. “What if I demonstrate for you, instead?” she murmured, stopping to dip her tongue into the indentations of his navel.

Ram groaned in need and she exulted in the power she held over him like this.

And then she proceeded to teach him everything she’d learned about love.

# About the Author

I'm a fan of all historical romance genres, and have been since I snuck my first romance novel by Kathleen Woodiwiss off my mother's bookshelf when I was 12. I read all genres, but historical romance has always been my great love. While I enjoy a good Regency romp, I prefer darker, grittier stories that torment the characters and force them to grow, and finally earn their happily ever after.

I live in South Florida with my husband, Ian, and a whole lot of cats (more than a dozen, less than 20!) If you have something to say about my story, I'd love to hear from you! You can reach me at KimberlyBrodyAuthor@gmail.com